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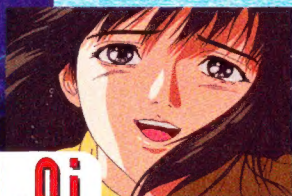
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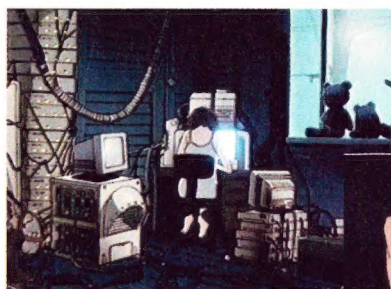


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VOLUME 71
ISSUE 2
NUMBER 597

STAR WARS SPECIAL

- 20 **Running the Belt**
by R. A. Salvatore
An exclusive sneak preview of the newest twist in the continuing saga of *Star Wars* novels
- 27 **On Star Wars, Fantasy—and Teenagers**
by Pamela Mohan
An interview with R. A. Salvatore
- 30 **A Guide to the Fiction of Star Wars**
Compiled by Sue Weinlein Cook
A comprehensive list of novels and comics



About the Cover Artist
Cliff Nielsen, an award-winning multimedia illustrator, gives us a new perspective on Star Wars imagery. For more about this amazing artist, see page 26.

Babylon 5

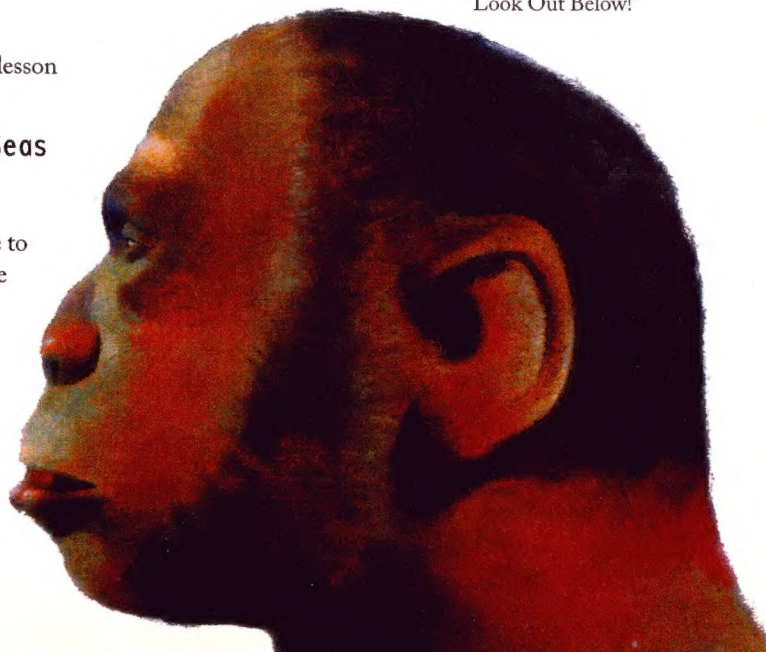
- 52 **The Shadow of His Thoughts**
by J. Michael Straczynski
The truth about his future sets Londo free

Fiction

- 32 **Travelers**
by Robert Silverberg
It wasn't even a nice place to visit
- 40 **The Fourth Branch**
by Kage Baker
A pagan storyteller, a Christian writer, and a friendship that would never die
- 60 **Heal Thyself**
by Orson Scott Card
A child's question leads to a lesson in evolution
- 66 **A Whisper of Caladan Seas**
by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson
They were dying to go home to the sea, but could they escape the sands of Dune?
- 74 **Moondance**
by Brian Plante
It's a wonderful night for ...
- 92 **Nursery Crimes**
by Devon Monk
Snow White and the Seven—Sins?

Departments

- 4 **FROM THE EDITOR**
Growing Season
- 6 **DISPATCHES**
Our readers write
- 8 **THE AMAZING TOP 10**
Hot Reads for Summer
- 10 **THE OBSERVATORY**
Ultimate Surveillance
by David Brin
- 14 **SCIENTIFICTION**
Reinventing the Past
by John C. Bunnell
- 82 **SILVER SCREEN**
Big Screen, Little Screen
by James Lowder
- 86 **ASK DR. SCIENCE**
He knows all about density and gravity
- 88 **GAME SPACE**
Looking Backward
by Lester Smith
Welcome to our newest feature. Come on, let's play!
- 96 **TIME MACHINE**
A 1940s warning to "Look Out Below!"





From the Editor

Growing Season

IT'S BEEN A BUSY SPRING for all of us at *AMAZING Stories*, full of good news and high hopes. As the weather gets warmer, we're turning up the heat on our plans for the future . . . and recently we reaped some rewards for our months of hard work.

In late April, *AMAZING Stories* was recognized at the 43rd annual Maggie Awards ceremony, sponsored by the Western Publications Association. The magazine won the 1999 award for Most Improved Annual, Semi-Annual, or Quarterly; and "Going Native" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (issue 594) was a finalist for the Best Fiction award.

At about the same time, we found out that no fewer than seven illustrations from *AMAZING Stories* were singled out by the jury for the Sixth Annual Spectrum International Competition for Fantastic Art. Each of the accepted works will be reproduced in full color in *Spectrum 6: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art*. Congratulations to the illustrators, and to the authors whose writing inspired them to do such great work: John Craig ("It All Started by Being Amazing" by Bruce Sterling), D. Alexander Gregory ("The Cost of Doing Business" by Leslie What), Gary Kelley ("State of Disorder" by Douglas Smith), Stephan Martiniere ("Digital Hearts and Minds" by Jake West), John Van Fleet and Kent Williams ("Going Native" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch), Janet Woolley ("Crane Fly" by Eliot Fintushel), and Mark Zug (the cover of issue 594).

We've come a long way in the year since this publication was redesigned and reborn, but in some ways it seems as though our first real growing season—the maturation of the magazine, and the reestablishment of *AMAZING Stories* as an influential member of the science fiction community—has just begun. The growing season is going to continue through the summer, when *AMAZING Stories* will be a major presence at one of the biggest conventions of the year.

That convention is the GEN CON® Game Fair—strictly speaking not a science fiction event, but a gaming and SF extravaganza that attracts upwards of twenty thousand people. Many of those fans come especially to take part in Science Fiction Saturday, an SF convention within a convention, which this year was organized and sponsored by *AMAZING Stories*.

In the tradition of Mardi Gras, Science Fiction Saturday is a celebration that spans more than the day for which it's named. You can find SF gaming events, workshops, and seminars throughout the four-day show. Saturday is the big day, with no fewer than thirty-two separate SF attractions. In the house will be Author Guest of Honor Kevin J. Anderson; *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* star Walter Koenig; Science Fiction Guest of Honor Warwick Davis of *Star Wars* fame; our very own Dr. Science, Neal Barrett, Jr.; and more than a dozen other TV celebrities, authors, and game designers.

If you want to make the weekend of August 5 to 8 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a time to remember, call 1-800-529-EXPO or drop a line to <gencon@andonunlimited.com>.

AMAZING Stories will celebrate a year of achievements and accolades at Science Fiction Saturday. At the same time we'll be looking ahead to a future filled with the promise of even greater accomplishments. I hope you'll join us for the festivities.

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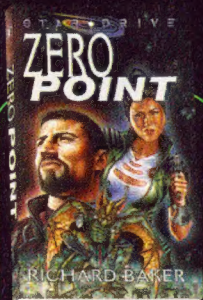


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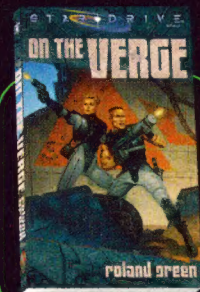


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Dispatches

Begging to Differ

There is still, despite the efforts of God and Harlan Ellison, a considerable gap between TV SF and the written form.

Kudos and Criticisms

Dear Kim Mohan and Associates,

Congratulations on the new incarnation of *AMAZING*. It's great to see the world's best SF magazine going strong (and getting stronger, by the look of it). I have only a few suggestions/quibbles to make: First, it took some doing for me to find an issue for sale. Your distribution department needs to widen its scope. I live in the wilds of Connecticut (meaning Hartford) and had to hunt quite a bit.

Next, I would caution you about playing up the TV tie-in fiction too much. There is still, despite the efforts of God and Harlan Ellison, a considerable gap between TV SF and the written form. Plugging the tie-ins runs the risk of lowering expectations, or turning off some readers outright.

I love the new design, but I do wonder if it's a good idea to run all the illustrations in color. When I think of the so-called "classic" SF artists (Finlay, Bok, Paul, etc.) I find their black-and-white work to be just as compelling as the color. I know that changing the design now might seem like the magazine is backsliding, but keep it in mind.

Last: I may be the first, but hopefully not the last, to vote for a revival of *Fantastic* (I prefer Palmer's title, *Fantastic Adventures*) in a similar format to *AMAZING*. This would satisfy my retrogressive fantasies of having the great SF/fantasy mags available (provided *Weird Tales* keeps publishing, and provided Bantam changes *Analog* back to *Astounding* and revives *Unknown*.) Oh, well, I can dream, can't I?

With all good wishes,

STEPHEN PERSING
Hartford CT



Attention Douglas Smith

Dear Mr. Smith,

I recently bought the Winter 1999 issue of *AMAZING Stories* and read your story "State of Disorder." I

really like Steven Hawking and was very pleased to see that some of his theories were included in part of the characterization of both Harnish and Mackaby. I watch *A Brief History of Time* occasionally and understand a little more each time I see it. Thank you.



Sincerely,
BARBARA MCNEILL

Author's Info Challenged

Dear Editor,

In his essay about SF on audio (issue 595) Brian Thomsen writes "The Caedmon (record) selections in the realm of the fantastic were pretty much limited to work such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the witches of *Macbeth*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and views of Hell as described by either Dante or Sartre" and were commercially released only to certain upscale record store chains in the major markets. Meaning no disrespect, there's a whopping gap in the author's knowledge of the subject.

Caedmon released albums of Leonard Nimoy reading from Ray Bradbury and H. G. Wells, William Shatner reading from Isaac Asimov and Henry Kuttner, and Christopher Plummer reading from T. H. White's *The Book of Merlyn*. But that's nothing: Between 1976 and 1983, they issued a number of LPs of authors reading their own material: Poul Anderson, *Yonder*; Ray Bradbury, *The Small Assassin*; Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Childhood's End*, and *The Fountains of Paradise*, as well as *Transit of Earth*, *The Nine Billion Names of God*, and *The Star*; Stephen R. Donaldson from *White Gold Wielder*; six albums of Frank Herbert from the *Dune* cycle (for which we should be grateful as we learn the official pronunciations of Bene Gesserit, Gholia, Muad'dib, etc.); Ursula K. Le Guin, *Gwylan's Harp* and *Intracom*; C. L. Moore, *Shambleau*; Robert Silverberg from *Dying Inside*; and Clifford D. Simak, "Aesop" from *City*. Artists like Leo and Diane Dillon, Frank Kelly Freas,

and John Schoenherr illustrated the jackets. Give Caedmon its due: No matter how you look at it, it's impressive.

I purchased these records at Barnes and Noble, Sam Goody's, and Tower Records; hardly upscale record chains.

LEO DOROSCHENKO
West Orange NJ

➡ "Dispatches" is the department where we print letters you send us. Tell us what you think of the magazine. Tell us how to make it better. If you have an opinion about some aspect of science fiction that the world needs to hear, tell us about that, too, and we'll tell it to the world.

Address your letter to *AMAZING Stories*, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707, or send it via email to amazing@wizards.com. If we publish your letter (and if you've provided us with a complete mailing address), we'll send you a free copy of that issue as a keepsake.



Contest Winners!

Congratulations to the winners of our Star Trek: Voyager Contest! The contest, announced in our Winter 1999 issue, asked entrants to correctly answer these five questions about the series:

1. What is the name of the alien race that collects body parts? [*the Vidiians*]
2. What is the name of the holographic doctor's creator? [*Dr. Lewis Zimmerman*]
3. The Trabe are the blood enemies of what other alien race? [*the Kazon*]
4. What is the name of the Caretaker's female counterpart? [*Suspiria*]
5. What is the Morilogium? [*the final stage in the life cycle of the Ocampa*]

Thanks to all who entered. All but three of you got all five questions right. The entry forms with the correct answers were placed in a box and winners randomly selected from the entire lot.

We also wish to offer a special thank-you to our cosponsors, who donated almost \$1,500 in Star Trek prizes!

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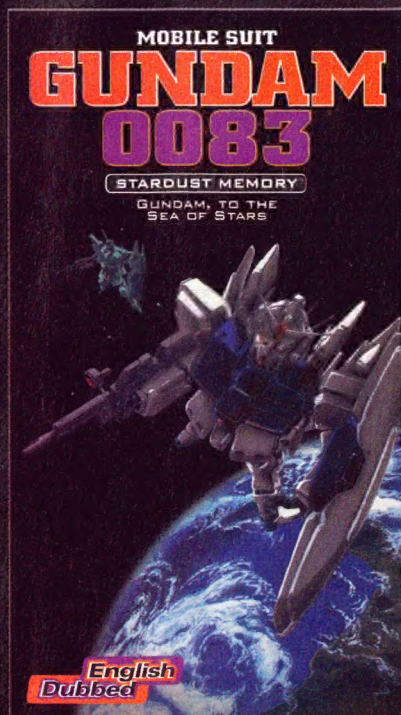
Pursuing the stolen Gundam, Kou Uraki and his comrades follow Anavel Gato into space. Here he experiences a crushing defeat and must turn to the unlikelyst of mentors - a former Zeon soldier! As Kou regains his confidence, he once again takes control of Gundam Unit-01. Episodes 5-6

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Hot Reads for Summer

Looking for something new to read? (Aren't we all?)

The AMAZING Stories editorial staff has compiled our personal recommendations for your summer reading pleasure. Titles are listed alphabetically according to author, and all of them are in print and available for your book dealer to order.

Yours, Isaac Asimov

Isaac Asimov,
edited by Stanley Asimov

This insightful book of letters, written by one of the greatest science and science fiction writers of all time, was compiled by his brother to give the reader an unprecedented personal look at Asimov: the man, the writer, the friend, the humanitarian.



Earth

David Brin

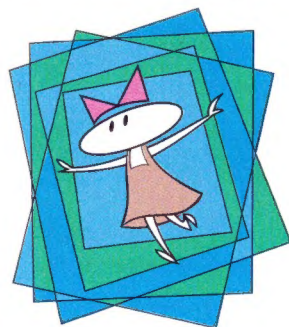
The author has won awards for his Uplift War novels, but this near-future SF thriller is brilliant in its own right. The year is 2038. A black hole has accidentally fallen inside our planet. Everything—and everyone—on Earth has only two years to live, unless...

Ender's Game

Orson Scott Card

Ender Wiggins was born to save the world, and he's sent off to prepare to do just that at the ripe old age of six. From

the moment you meet this child military genius until the story's startling conclusion, you will not want to tear yourself away from this Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning book.



A Wrinkle in Time

Madeleine L'Engle

The story of a girl's search for her father across the vastness of space endures, thanks to its charming characters, adventurous spirit, and enthusiastic exploration of SF concepts. Moments of whimsy, terror, grandeur, and discovery lead to the triumph of the individual in a read that's just as rewarding now as when you were a child.

City of Truth

James Morrow

Meet Jack Sperry, who's living the ideal life in Veritas, the City of Truth, where even politicians give it to you straight. But Jack learns the value of the little white lie when his son becomes gravely ill, for telling the boy the truth would ruin the short time he has left. If you take only one trip this summer, escape with father and son to the City of Lies—a place where rats chase cats and pigs really can fly.

The Mote in God's Eye

Larry Niven
and Jerry Pournelle

In this modern classic, humanity's first encounter with extraterrestrial intelligence doesn't happen until a thousand years from now. To the citizens of the thirty-first century, the Moties were well worth waiting for. *The Mote in God's Eye* is one of the best first-contact stories ever told—published twenty-five years ago, but still as fresh as tomorrow's headlines.

Expiration Date

Tim Powers

In the near future of *Expiration Date*, a new drug is in vogue: the spirit, present in a dying person's final breath and captured in a test tube. Into this setting is released the spirit of Thomas Edison. The attempts by a dizzying array of characters to track down this "Big Ghost" and the boy who has unwittingly become his host make this clever book a compelling page-turner.



The Hollow Man

Dan Simmons

We first thought to include *Hyperion* on this list, but, since you undoubtedly have already read it (No? What are you waiting for?), we devoted the slot to another excellent

Simmons title. This tale of a telepath on a journey of self-discovery following the death of his wife is always surprising. The book's revealing ending, which places the story in a startling new context, makes you immediately want to go back to the beginning and reread it with new eyes.

Millennium

John Varley

The story starts out with a midair collision between a 747 and a DC-10... and then it gets *really* interesting. Here's time travel with a terrific twist, from a writer whose short stories are also not to be missed. If you've seen the movie of the same name, forget everything you know and get this book.

On Basilisk Station

David Weber

The popular Honor Harrington series evokes the feel of C. S. Forester's Hornblower books in a classic military SF setting. The author skillfully deals with the technology and logistics of futuristic war without sacrificing characterization and intricate plotting. Where Weber shines brightest, though, is with his title character, Honor Harrington—a strong heroine and a noble, larger-than-life officer who remains utterly believable.

Talk Back!

What have you been reading this summer? Email us your recommendations at amazing@wizards.com or write us at P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707. We'll print replies in our next issue and on our website at www.amazingstoriesmagazine.com.



THE NEXUS OF ALL REALITIES

Whether you have distinctive forehead markings, you bleed acid, or your driver's license lists you as "399,747,023 of 6 billion," the **Gen Con** Game Fair is the center of the universe for paranormal sci-fi comings and goings on.

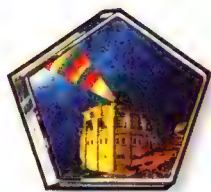
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IT'S LIKE SOMETHING OUT OF A BAD THRILLER. So-called "friends" set up wiretaps to snare people who trust them. A relentless media leers at both the famous and the obscure. Polemics about indecency and morality are overshadowed when a pornographer offers bounties to dig up dirt on the prosecuting side. The sanctimonious are caught with their pants down, while citizens forgive a sinner who seems to be like them.

May 1931

Far from becoming a simplified and routine matter, the life of the detective seems to become increasingly difficult. True, science has aided him not a little to detect the criminal. On the other hand, criminals have perverted the use of science to their own ends. But perhaps this only tends to make life more interesting for the sleuth—if more exciting.

Editor's introduction to "The Radio Detective"
by Lincoln S. Colby



There have been many postmortems of the so-called "Monicagate" affair, which held the U.S. transfixed much longer than most of us wanted. While pundits pontificate, the verdict of a majority of people seems clear enough. They wanted revelations and investigations . . . but then lost interest when it grew evident that vital issues weren't at stake. Both in last November's elections and during the subsequent impeachment trial, their priority seems to have been YES to disclosure, and NO to vindictive retribution. High moral principles paled next to the fact that the charges seemed *pragmatically* trivial.

We'll cover some possible reasons for this public attitude later. However, let me confess that I care less about the recent theater-on-the-Potomac than about something happening at the edges—the ever-growing presence and influence of technological means for letting people peer at other people.

Those familiar with my novel *Earth* know I've been interested for a long time in what may happen to us as cameras keep getting smaller, cheaper and more mobile, enabling surveillance to invade our lives as never before. I explored these themes further in a recent nonfiction book titled *The Transparent Society: Will Technology Force Us to Choose Between Privacy and Freedom?* in which I discuss the implications of cheap, pilotless drones, smaller than your hand, that will be sold at Radio Shack in just a few years. And the new millimeter-wave radar that sees through clothes as it looks for

plastic weapons. These are just a couple of examples of new technologies that will expand vision and memory in the next century . . . like it or not.

Two potential breakthroughs in surveillance seem particularly interesting from a science-fictional point of view. They are both speculative and potentially disturbing.

What Lies in Our Future?

First, let's think about what society would be like if we developed a truly effective *lie detector*.

I'm not talking about the ill-famed "polygraph." In 1997 the U.S. Supreme Court heard yet another round of arguments that this venerable device was at last ready to take its place among the respectable tools of jurisprudence, despite a spotty record that has given the whole concept an aura of crackpot magicianship. This machine has a reputation that seems to have deterred many futurists from considering what might happen if a truly effective technique were ever found, allowing people to reliably separate fact from fabrication.

In fact, trying to distinguish truth from deceit has been one of the most tantalizingly difficult problems faced by humanity. It may be one mental activity we devote even more gray matter to than making guesses about the future! Each of us can recall many painful episodes in life when we pondered worriedly about another person's veracity, or else sweated it out while someone paid us the same acute scrutiny.

I would never underplay the difficulty of inventing a truly useful and effective lie detector. Scientists have found that human beings are especially talented prevaricators. Robert Wright's book *The Moral Animal* holds that deception was a crucial skill in the human mental inventory as we evolved. And an important part of this skill is deftness at fooling ourselves! We can lie more convincingly by creating realistic supporting images and feelings in our minds, as if the whopper we just told were actually true. Making up tales—and believing in them, at least temporarily—is a favorite human pastime.

This makes the task of designing an effective lie detector challenging, to say the least. James Halperin depicts the difficult search for such a device in his novel *The Truth Machine*. And yet, there appears to be some growing enthusiasm for the idea. As researchers sift and parse the brain's workings down to neuron-by-neuron analysis, who can guarantee they won't discover some "verity locus" that we all share—or some set of telltale autonomic signs—that might even be detected and read from afar?

If such a device is ever developed, it will spawn many different reactions. The late columnist Mike Royko once wrote an essay titled "Let's give lying

the respect it deserves,” claiming that without lies we would have chaos, rioting, and a collapsed economy. If our leaders told the truth, they would most likely all be out of jobs, and we would all be nervous wrecks. Stressing the diametrically opposite perspective, Brad Blanton, Ph.D., says in *Radical Honesty: How to Transform Your Life by Telling the Truth* that “Lying is the major source of all human stress.” Blanton recommends eliminating even the “little white lies” that seem to

poll among male and female friends, regarding their attitudes toward the desirability of an effective, cheaply available lie detector. Draw your own conclusions.)

In any event, the point here is not that a fool-proof lie detector is desirable, or even that it is likely—only that it may be plausible. If a Truth Machine ever did appear, it would have tremendous potential, either for beneficial use or wretched abuse.

The Observatory

February 1929

Once in a while a philosopher breaks loose and begins to question life in general and to ask “why is life?” Of course, no satisfactory answer has ever come forth, and probably none ever will be found.

*“Extravagant Fiction Today
... Cold Fact Tomorrow,”
Hugo Gernsback, editor*



Winter 1941

Since March 1926, when the April issue, Volume 1, Number 1, went on sale, *AMAZING Stories* has gone on continuing publication even through the darkest depression days, and today, not only does it hold the reputation of being the oldest in the field, but the best.

*“The Observatory
by the Editor,”
B. G. Davis, editor*



April 1941

Newest mystery of the atmosphere is the hitherto unseen “skywriting” left in the wake of high-flying planes. What does it mean?

*From the column
“Scientific Mysteries”*



smooth life's daily encounters at work or at the breakfast table.

For most of us, a less radical midway opinion may be more typical. We want to catch evil before it harms us . . . but leave enough slack for the little prevarications that ease life along. We don't look at lying digitally, but as an analog phenomenon with each case falling on a sliding scale from harmless all the way to deadly and demoniacal.

Of course, this attitude toward lying resonates with recent events in our national life, where the practical triviality of a famous lie seemed more significant to most people than the fundamental fact that a lie had been committed. It might also explain why so many women seem willing to forgive Bill Clinton, despite loathing the specific acts that were revealed by the harsh lie detector of relentless investigation. They don't mind the fact that he was caught! They just think that the President's subsequent punishment should properly be decided by the one he hurt.

(The reader is invited to try taking an informal

We want to catch evil before it harms us . . . but leave enough slack for the little prevarications that ease life along.

If it were somehow monopolized in the hands of a narrow elite—any elite—it could be a tyrant's dream come true.

If distributed instead to Earth's billions, it would surely be a bloody damned nuisance—one that we'd all need time to adjust to. But we *would* adapt . . . and the machine would then be any despot's worst nightmare.

From Detection to Prediction

Related to lie detection, but even more disturbing, is the concept of proclivities profiling.

Suppose it became possible to combine a suite of factors, from both nature and nurture, and from them draw a statistically valid inference regarding which individuals in society are likely, or predisposed, to commit crimes.

If this question—the very idea of it—scrapes a

The Observatory

November 1950

The saying is that nice things come in small packages. But in this tiny box was horror beyond the dreams of insanity!

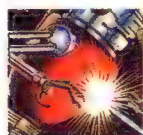
Editor's introduction to
"The Devil in a Box"
by Gerald Vance



January 1949

Pete had a tough decision to make when a robot came to the pearly gates and asked admission. Should he—or could he—let him in?

Editor's introduction to
"The Robot and the Pearly Gates"
by Peter Worth



February 1949

Lefty Baker would have preferred to remain in the insane asylum if he had known what it would mean for rabbits to be deathless!

Editor's introduction to
"The Immortal Menace"
by Craig Browning



History shows that people have an ancient and pervasively nasty habit of judging others by whatever standards are fashionable at a given moment.

raw nerve, good! It ought to. History shows that people have an ancient and pervasively nasty habit of judging others by whatever standards are fashionable at a given moment, quickly pigeonholing them into categories, then shunting their destinies toward peasantry, isolation, persecution, or even death. Each of us will admit falling for this nasty temptation, stereotyping those around us all too often in daily life. And yet, our official morality now rails against this practice. According to modern sensibilities in the neo-West, it is sinful to prejudge a person. We're supposed to punish only the transgressions a guy *does* commit, not rely on a statistical correlation suggesting he may be somewhat more likely to misbehave in the future.

But think about it. Whether you believe that behavior is most influenced by genes, or upbringing, or—like most of us—you figure both play a complex, synergistic role in the mystery of individualization, would you bet your life savings that researchers *won't* find sets of highly significant correlations in the near future?

It could be a combination of blood type with an inherited allergy, with a history of beatings in the home . . . plus having watched too many Chuck Norris movies while eating a particular brand of cheese puffs. The important point is that, in a world filled with curious and inventive sleuths, equipped with fantastic laboratory and computational tools, any such correlations that do exist will be ferreted out during the next few decades. Even if some connections later prove spurious—lacking true underlying causality—they will draw lots of attention, so we had better be ready for the howling storm of public opinion when the announcements come.

How should we react when some researchers announce that they can profile people according to their proclivities toward violence or some other form of unsavory behavior? One supposes that this profiling would not be the same as in the classic *Love, American Style* skit, in which girls accessed a computerized database to preevaluate boys according to their actual past behavior, as reported by previous dates. Rather, these new proclivities profiles may be applied to people who haven't yet done anything wrong!

An automatic (and in many ways admirable) response would be to forbid proclivities profiling from the very start. But that opens up a real can of worms, including issues of free-speech suppression and the squelching of open scientific enquiry. Any high moral position that rests on suppressing knowledge stands on very shaky ground.

Moreover, if violence is sickness, might we somehow *help* the predisposed in advance, with special training to control their inner drives? What happens when a set of profiles results in the actual avoidance of a certain number of crimes, sparing some potential victims from injury or death? What about Megan's Law, requiring the registration of a sex offender's history and address, thereby warning neighbors when a former sexual predator starts living in their midst? Such laws shine a spotlight on people who manifest a higher likelihood of committing *future* crimes. In this case, the increased danger is demonstrable, based on past transgressions, and potentially severe enough to merit strong measures. But isn't that

exactly what you'd expect to see the first time such procedures work their way into law? Once the basic principle is established, we are only arguing over details.

This issue used to lurk at the margins of science, promoted by enthusiasts with marginal credentials whose agendas sometimes fumed with a redolence of racism. But the field has progressed lately. *Psychiatric Annals* recently devoted an entire volume to "Psychiatric Aspects of Wickedness."

Let me emphasize that my feelings are as muddled as any reader's. The potential for abuse is horrifying . . . just as it's tempting to imagine how many of the people one sees in the news—from spouse-abusers to serial killers—might have led better lives if they had been offered a choice of eclectic and caring medical helpers, long before they proceeded to wreak havoc around them. On the one hand, proclivities profiling could be unmatched as a potential tool for suppressing diversity. Yet the most harmful possible outcome isn't always what happens when we stumble into a new and unavoidable branch of science.

Again, I find this prospect unnerving, even terrifying. Yet it's clear that such tools will only be made worse if they are held closely by a secretive cabal. If proclivities profiling is inevitable, we may be better off sharing responsibility for it, arguing passionately over what the techniques imply, and debating how best to minimize the harm they do.

Might a "glass houses" effect preserve us against the worst abuses? Could it be that our main hope for tolerance will be found in the imperfections that we *all* carry around? In the fact that each of us has flaws and shortcomings that need empathy or forgiveness from others?

Suppose Bill Clinton had been diagnosed as a latent skirt-chaser early on. Knowing that power tends to affect men in ways quite similar to Viagra—just ask fourteen of the last seventeen Presidents—might young Bill's guidance counselors have tried channeling him away from politics and toward a career filled with fresh air, hard work, and cold showers . . . say, as a lumberjack? Would we all have been better off? Or, given that millions of people seem to appreciate his administrative skills, might a wise society simply have run that gawky teen through some sensitivity training exercises and then left him alone to deal with it as well as he could?

As with so many other kinds of surveillance, our chief hope seems to be that *everyone* will share the light . . . and then learn enough grown-up compassion to use it with wisdom and restraint.

What if *self-righteousness* were ranked right up there as one of those potentially harmful tenden-

cies, measured as a proclivity to injure others by judging or stereotyping them too harshly or too quickly? What if kids were routinely taught to recognize this potentiality in themselves, and to compensate for the impulse with a little self-control? Might that cancel out the potential for abuse?

If so, this extraordinarily searing kind of light may not do quite as much harm as envisioned in our worst fears. Especially if it teaches us to mix pragmatism with hope, pity, and a whole lot of humility.

The Ultimate Solution

From possible lie detectors and proclivities profiling to other types of technological and sociological surveillance techniques, the future seems to offer a plethora of plausible ways for others to peer at you.

Some people will inevitably suggest eliminating threats such as these by passing laws, assailing the *knowing* of certain things. But, ironically, those people will be reaching in supplication toward the one power center that they claim to fear most, government, pleading that we should grant the authorities whole new avenues of regulation and control. New bureaucracies to direct and confine how much or what types of knowledge people should have. Of course, the mighty will flout those laws. Information will be sought and paid for, even if the market is driven underground to create an economy of smuggled contraband, controlled by unscrupulous people.

But perhaps all is not lost! Maybe some new technology will come along to rescue us from ourselves, providing a way to shield you and me from being peered at, poked, analyzed, and parsed right down to our genetic code. This new gimmick may arrive in time to be our salvation.

I wouldn't count on it, though.

A better answer may be found elsewhere. To paraphrase the futurist Peter Schwartz, if it is not possible to be confident in our tools, or our predictions, perhaps we should try having confidence in ourselves. ☹



about the author

As a scientist, David Brin studied comets and spacecraft design and taught university physics and writing courses. A New York Times bestselling author, Brin has won Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and John W. Campbell awards for his novels and short stories.

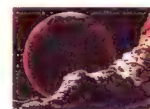
He lives in San Diego, California, with his wife, Cheryl Brigham, their three children, and about a hundred demanding trees.

The Observatory

August 1940

"They can't accuse me of a crime when there is no evidence that it has been committed," said Karl Tarig. So he sent the body of the murdered man into the future. But he didn't realize the truth of the adage: Time will tell!

Editor's introduction to "Murder in the Time World" by Malcolm Jameson



February 1940

Suddenly the citizens of Weston found themselves in a plague of truth, and there was the devil to pay that a few lies might easily have prevented.

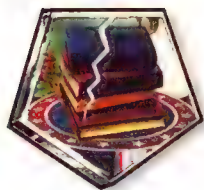
Editor's introduction to "Truth Is a Plague," by David Wright O'Brien



March 1940

Horse-sense Hank could answer all the problems of science. He could even apply logic to love. But turnips . . . !

Editor's introduction to "The Scientific Pioneer" by Nelson S. Bond



Sciencifiction

by John C. Bunnell

Reinventing the Past

DEFINING SCIENCE FICTION—or in the present case, “scifiction”—is one of the genre’s most enduring cans of worms. In some respects, I come into the debate as a conservative: I like pure SF that relies on careful extrapolation of interesting scientific theories and ideas. But I have a broad definition of the word “scien-

tific,” I’m a sucker for a good space opera, and I will take entertaining stories almost anywhere I can find them—all of which tends to push me over toward the liberal end of the SF-defining continuum.

For instance, I count history as a scientific discipline, which puts alternate history firmly under the SF umbrella. Some histories, however, are more alternate than others, and thereby hang several intriguing novels.

The Shadow of Ararat

Thomas Harlan

Tor (hc, 512 pp.)

ISBN 0-312-86543-0 \$26.95

Sailing to Sarantium

Guy Gavriel Kay

HarperPrism (hc, 438 pp.)

ISBN 0-06-105117-9 \$24.00

In some ways, *The Shadow of Ararat* and *Sailing to Sarantium* are remarkably similar. Both novels are crafted from the legends and history we

define today as “classical”—that of the Roman and Byzantine empires at the height of their power and influence. Both draw protagonists from the far reaches of their respective empires into elite circles of intrigue, conspiracy, and danger. And both begin epics that promise to continue in further volumes.

The spine of the advance copy bills *The Shadow of Ararat* as fantasy, but the description does first-time novelist Thomas Harlan a disservice. True, the world Harlan presents—a Roman empire where Christianity never took hold, and mighty brother emperors rule from Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east—is markedly different from that of our own sixth century. But he builds this shadow-

Rome brick by brick from authentic materials and populates it with convincingly drawn characters, including several whose histories in our world are well known. Better still, Harlan’s command of military strategy and tactics is thorough and vividly realized. When Roman and Persian armies clash in these pages, we can feel the dust sting our eyes and the ground shake beneath the rush of cavalry charges.

At the same time, the novel is unconventional by the usual standards of alternate history, notably with regard to Harlan’s treatment of matters magical. Sorcery is real in this milieu, and diverse in its application. The Egyptian academy where “barbarian” Dwyryn MacDonald is a student begins by teaching him plausible-seeming meditative techniques and disciplines. However, when

Dwyryn is abruptly pressed into a military assignment, he proves to possess dangerous fire-calling powers. Maxian Atreus, brother to two emperors, has priestly healing abilities—but upon discovering an insidious, long-hidden curse that could wither the entire empire from within, he channels his gifts into a series of bizarre necromantic experiments. And behind the magic-backed Persian armies that threaten Constantinople lurks a presence that may be demonic in origin.

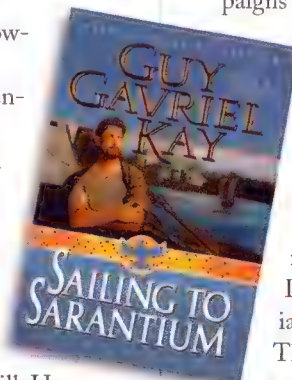
In unskilled hands, a narrative on this scale could quickly become a hopeless, confusing tangle. Harlan, however, is equal to the challenge. The grand sweep of the Roman and Persian military campaigns is neatly balanced

by the attention he devotes to his major and minor protagonists, whose adventures are woven through the novel. Besides Dwyryn and Maxian, these include Thyatis Julia Clodia, a young woman

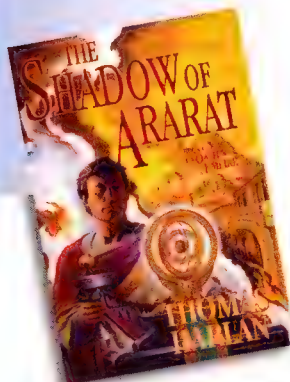
whose skill at undercover warfare proves invaluable to the Roman cause, and the Egyptian sorcerer Ahmet, a onetime teacher of Dwyryn’s whose decision to track down his pupil ultimately leads him in a far different direction.

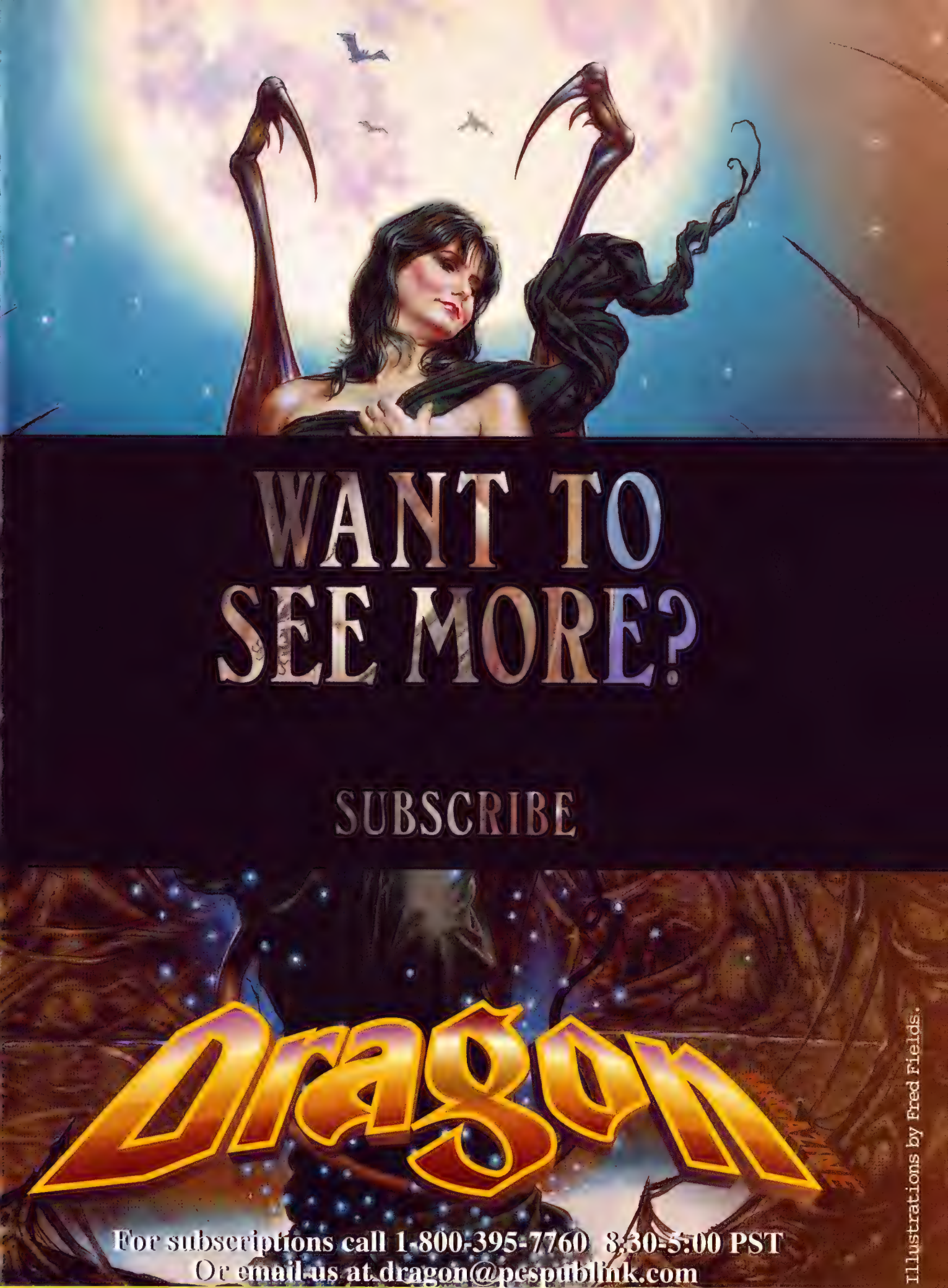
Sailing to Sarantium, by contrast, focuses primarily on a single individual. Crispin of Varena is a gifted mosaicist. The new Sarantine emperor needs such an artist to design an intricate, tiled pattern that will adorn an enormous domed shrine, and Guy Gavriel Kay’s novel chronicles Crispin’s response to that call.

While Kay has changed the names and altered the land-



With this issue, Amazing Stories revives a popular feature: our regular column of book reviews. This month, among his highlighted titles, John C. Bunnell examines several worthy “might-have-beens.”





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scape, it is clear both from the title and the imagery that this, too, is a narrative built on the foundations of Byzantine history and culture. From similar roots, though, Kay has grown a much different empire. Where Constantinople and Rome stand together in Harlan's milieu, *Sarantium* endures alone, surviving long past the fall of Rhodia, a dim memory at the time of Kay's narrative. And while the Sarantine empire appears to be the cultural center of its world, its military and political influence is not so broad. A network of surrounding kingdoms and states respects Sarantine power but is governed loosely at best by Sarantine interests. Crispin, for example, is able to exploit corruption in a government-run inn to save a young woman marked for ritual sacrifice, and the queen of a border state secretly recruits him to deliver a highly personal message to the Sarantine emperor.

When Kay's novel concerns itself with action and dialogue—the aforementioned rescue, a high-stakes chariot race, Crispin's intrigue-ridden appearance at a Sarantine court banquet—*Sailing to Sarantium* sparkles with wit and complexity. But all too often Kay steps back from the main plot, adopting an odd mix of a voice-over narrator's tone and the academic style of a scholar writing many years after the fact. The result reads more like a travelogue than a novel: vivid visual imagery, but little substantive content or dramatic conflict.

The contrast between Harlan's plotting and Kay's is more than a matter of differing structures. The suspense in *Ararat* doesn't spring solely from its multiple protagonists,

but from Harlan's ability to surprise the reader within each of the many strands of the plot. By contrast, there is virtually no suspense in *Sarantium*, as nothing that happens to Crispin severely challenges him physically or intellectually. Whenever a dangerous situation arises, Crispin has the right tool at hand to defuse it: the signature of a high-ranking official

***The Shadow of Albion* is considerably more than romantic fantasy. The plot is as sinuous as a charmed cobra and moves as fast as a striking mongoose.**

on his travel papers, a talisman provided by a convenient alchemist, a clever word or insight that owes as much to authorial stage managing as to Crispin's native wit.

The Shadow of Ararat isn't flawless. Where Kay gives too much background—it takes fifty pages of prologue before we so much as meet Crispin—Harlan occasionally delivers slightly less than enough, notably with respect to necromantic matters and the predilections of certain secondary characters. And it isn't completely clear just what Dwyryn does and doesn't accomplish during a climactic magical sequence. But where Harlan's first novel skillfully chronicles a full-scale war, Kay's latest tale is mostly setup for future volumes in the series. *Sailing to Sarantium* is, at best, worth a marginal recommendation. *The Shadow of Ararat*, by contrast, is not only an ambitious debut novel, but a first-rate alternate history by any standard.

The Shadow of Albion

Andre Norton and Rosemary Edghill

Tor (hc, 352 pp.)

ISBN 0-312-86427-2 \$23.95

From classical Rome we move forward to England at the turn of the nineteenth century—but just as Thomas Harlan reinvents Rome for his own ends, so do Rosemary Edghill and Andre Norton

engineered by agents of Napoleon's French regime, while country-born Sarah is trying to retain her own identity in the face of servants and seeming friends who insist that she's the Marchioness of Roxbury.

Norton and Edghill fulfill all the expectations of Regency romance—elaborate costume balls, elegant language, the marriage of convenience that transforms

into a love match. But *The Shadow of Albion* is considerably more than romantic fantasy. The historical left turns are meticulously worked out, with

cameo appearances by a number of surprising personages. The plot is as sinuous as a charmed cobra and moves as fast as a striking mongoose. And the authors tip their hats to a whole host of action heroes ranging from the Scarlet Pimpernel to James Bond to Indiana Jones to a certain Marvel Comics character—all without stepping too far out of period.

It's tempting to compare *The Shadow of Albion* to *The Two Georges*, the Harry Turtledove/Richard Dreyfuss collaboration of a year or two back. Though set in nominally different periods, both novels are essentially thrillers of similar ambition and scope. And while Turtledove is generally counted as the premier practitioner of alternate history, it's really *The Shadow of Albion* that offers the more carefully crafted historical twist.

One can quibble about loose plot threads: We never



ring changes on the popular "Regency" period of English history. In a concise three-page introduction, Norton explains the particular twist of fate separating the novel's England from the one we know: a secret marriage by Charles II that has kept the throne in Stuart hands for several generations.

We're then thrust directly into a whirlwind series of adventures that combine elements of swashbuckling action, ingenious spycraft, and elegantly breathless romance. Our heroine is one Sarah Cunningham, who's been shanghaied from our world to substitute for her dying counterpart in the alternate England. Her partner in intrigue is the erstwhile Duke of Wessex, who is unaware that Sarah has replaced the woman to whom he's been technically betrothed for years.

But romance is the last thing on either of their minds for some time. Wessex is kept busy defusing a series of plots

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learn just what the Marquis de Sade was up to in Denmark, where Sarah's father got a certain unusual ring, or precisely what agenda lies behind Sarah's shift between worlds. But these are trifles that likely will be addressed in a promised sequel. Meanwhile, readers should have no trouble enjoying a novel as smoothly crafted as it is entertaining.

Against the Tide of Years

S. M. Stirling
Roc (pb, 454 pp.)
ISBN 0-451-45743-9 \$6.99

"Alternate history" doesn't precisely describe S. M. Stirling's series about the severely displaced population of Nantucket Island, of which *Against the Tide of Years* is the second volume. True, the Nantucketers are living in what would be 1240 B.C. or so by modern dating; true as well that alert readers will recognize many of the archaeological and mythological underpinnings of Stirling's narrative. But where most alternate history derives its impact from ingenious "what if" scenarios, Stirling focuses instead on characters thrust into a new and unfamiliar world and the methods by which they cope with that challenge.

However, as with more traditional alternate history works, there's a genuine sense of history about the story. Stirling perfectly captures the sense of scale and the context of real-world events, the idea that what we learn from his account is only a narrow view of a larger landscape with no neat beginnings or endings. At the same time, he remembers that individuals are at the heart of most historical events. While fans of the

prior volume, *Island in the Sea of Time*, will enjoy the reappearance of favorite characters, the central figures in this book are siblings Kathryn and Kenneth Hollard, who find more than they bargained for as they travel to Babylon on Nantucket's behalf.

Besides the inevitable frustration that the book ends too soon, the sole true annoyance in the present volume is that the lists of dates given in chapter headings are frequently difficult to match with individual scenes. The impact on the narrative flow is minimal, but those seeking to work out a thorough chronology may find the process murky. This irritant is minor, though, and *Against the Tide of Years* confirms what readers of the first book already knew: S. M. Stirling is writing some of the best straight-ahead science fiction the genre has ever seen.

READERS OF this latest incarnation of *AMAZING Stories* are no strangers to media tie-in fiction, nor should they be. Books set in universes derived from TV shows, computer games, and other media properties now make up a sizable percentage of published science fiction. Whether that's a good thing or not is hotly debated among professional writers—but it's also a fact of life, and no reviewer who ignores tie-in fiction can hope to cover the SF genre comprehensively. (It should be added for the record that the views expressed in this space are entirely mine and reflect no corporate agenda or advertising program.)

STAR*DRIVE: Zero Point

Richard Baker
TSR (pb, 312 pp.)
ISBN 0-7689-1367-3 \$5.99

I commented above that I'm a sucker for a good space opera. *Zero Point* qualifies in that category; ambitiously multifaceted characters and a convoluted plot make the

novel decidedly above average for its class.

It's not necessary to be familiar with the STAR*DRIVE roleplaying universe to follow the action.

Author Richard Baker leaps directly into a

brisk storyline that combines the travails of a mercenary adventurer with the discovery of a mysterious alien starship. Pyotr Sokolov is supposed to be returning fleeing scientist Geille Monashi to her none-too-savory corporate employer. But after a narrow escape from even less savory pirate forces, he and Monashi are abruptly sidetracked halfway across known space by a force that does supposedly impossible things to stardrive engines. What they find is a seemingly abandoned spacecraft of unknown origin, and before long everyone within several light-years is after the prize.

Baker maintains a brisk pace throughout the tale, and develops the scenario with admirable attention to logic. If there's a flaw, it's that there's too much plot for the available space. In devoting primary attention to the alien craft and to Sokolov's growing sense of principle, he gives too little attention to a plotline involving Monashi's unique

mental powers and her own past. Barring a sequel, we also don't see quite enough of the alien agenda by the tale's end.

On the other hand, Sokolov and Monashi are unusually well drawn for space opera protagonists. Baker gives considerable attention to developing Sokolov's personality and motivations, and does not rush the complex relationship that develops between Sokolov and Monashi. It's particularly refreshing—and plausible—to watch them anticipating each other's motives and strategies as the novel progresses. Both are smart and slow to bestow trust, and Baker conveys these qualities with rare insight.

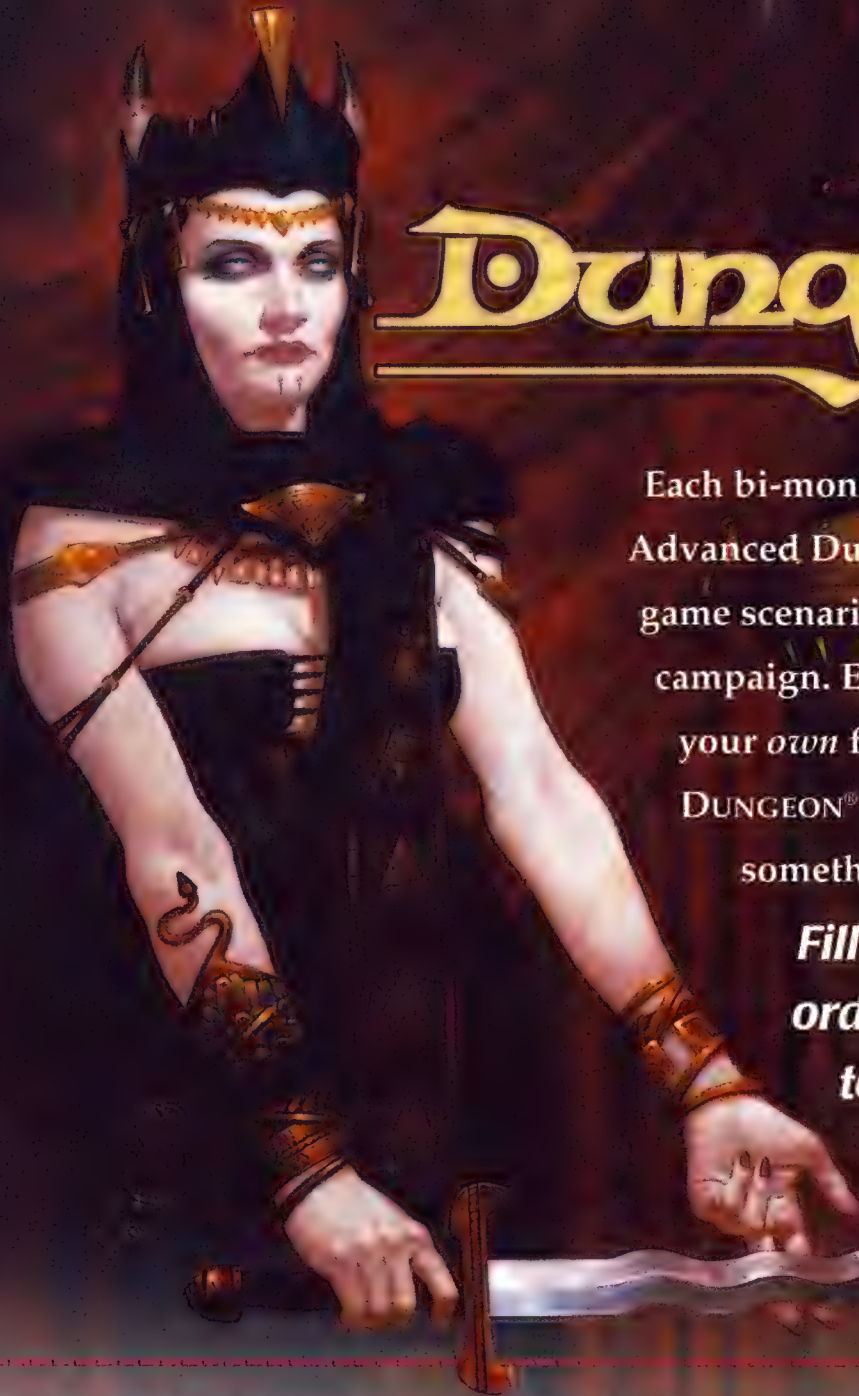
It's that unusual relationship, a case of kindred spirits set against each other, that makes the novel absorbing despite the overcrowded plot. *Zero Point* is space opera with a soul, and that's an uncommon virtue. ♣

about the author



John C. Bunnell has reviewed SF and fantasy for a variety of publications including DRAGON® magazine, AMAZING Stories, and the Hugo-nominated Tangent. His short fiction has appeared in anthologies ranging from Swashbuckling Editor Stories to Deals With the Devil to the forthcoming Bruce Coville's Shapeshifters. He lives and writes in Oregon, in an apartment badly in need of more bookshelves and a working vacuum cleaner.

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STAR WARS

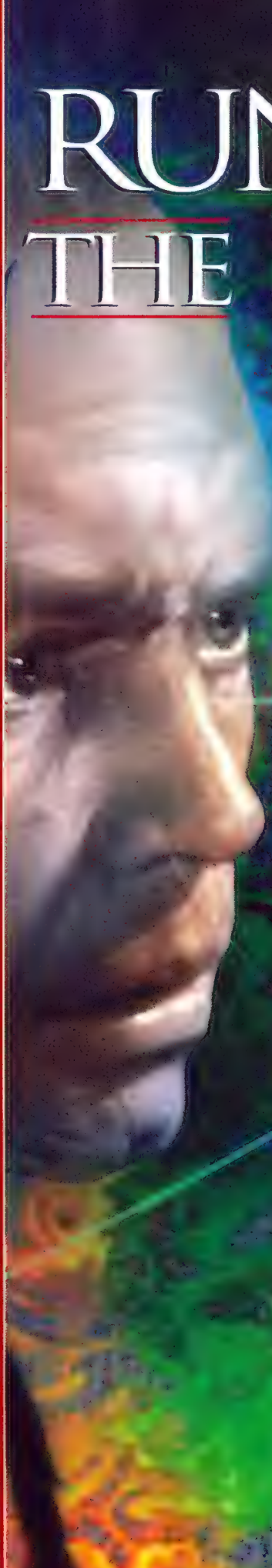
An exciting new era of Star Wars history is about to begin—as fantasy and science fiction's most acclaimed authors propel the legendary epic into the next millennium, introducing us to a rich cast of characters that features old favorites—Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, and Leia Organa-Solo—along with the next generation of Jedi and never-before-seen creatures, droids, and deadly agents of darkness. In *Vector Prime*, the launch novel for this new saga, New York Times bestselling author R. A. Salvatore takes the Star Wars universe to previously unscaled heights of action and imagination, expanding the beloved story of a galaxy far, far away.

The following episode, taken from Chapter 10 of the novel, brings together several characters from the original films. But the stars of the show in this chapter are a new bunch of youngsters: Jaina and Jacen, the twin teenagers of Han and Leia, and Anakin, their third child.

RUNNING THE BELT

BY R. A. SALVATORE

ILLUSTRATION BY
CLIFF NIELSEN



"I WOULDN'T HAVE EXPECTED anything less of Lando," Han remarked when the *Millennium Falcon* came out of hyperspace and into view of the planets Lando Calrissian had taken for home and office. All the region about the two planets looming before them was littered with spacecraft, everything from small starfighters to the huge freighters and even larger shieldships Lando had used to protect other vessels when he had been mining on Nkllon, a planet too close to its sun.

"More traffic than at the Core," Luke's voice piped in over the comm, as the *Jade Sabre* came out of hyperspace right beside the *Falcon*.

That left only Jaina and the X-wing still to be counted. Han glanced at his wife, noting her concern. The trip from Reece had taken a week, and while that was no problem in the comfort of the *Millennium Falcon* or the *Jade Sabre*, such a journey could tax an X-wing pilot to her limits. To say nothing of supplies. Jedi going on long journeys usually slipped into a self-induced, nearly comatose state, slowing their metabolism and, for all intents and purposes, sleeping through the journey.



Jaina had learned the technique and had proven she could do it well, in her training with Mara.

But doing it in a training room was very different from doing it in an X-wing on a long and lonely journey.

Even Luke had questioned his wife repeatedly about whether Jaina was ready for this. Mara had insisted that she was, and no one could doubt Jaina's piloting prowess. Since Mara was Jaina's official tutor, there could be no debate, not even from Leia and Han, neither of whom was especially thrilled about putting their daughter into any kind of danger.

So Jaina had flown out here in the X-wing, same course, same destination, same speed as the other two ships.

Why wasn't she out of hyperspace yet?

That question hung palpably between Leia and Han, neither speaking it aloud, neither having to.

"Let me guess which planet is Lando's," came Luke's

call, his tone dry and sarcastic. The answer was obvious. One of the planets before them was brown and appeared quite inhospitable, while the other was blue and green, with white clouds floating through its sky. The scene reminded Leia and Mara of the two planets they had recently visited: hospitable Osarian and rugged Rhommamool.

"Luke, where is Jaina?" Leia called, doing well to keep the concern out of her voice. She heard laughter from the other ship—Mara's.

"Why isn't she out yet?" Leia pressed.

"Because Mara fed Artoo the wrong coordinates," Luke replied.

"A little test," Mara explained, coming online. "Jaina's nearby, but far enough out of the system so that she'll have few reference points to use in righting her course."

"She's probably panicking," Leia replied, and she could easily visualize the grin spreading on Mara's

"For a while, no doubt," Mara answered. "But all she needs to do is look inside herself, to seek out the Force and its connection between her and us, and particularly to Jacen, and she'll fly in at any minute."

"And Artoo knows the real way in any case," Luke quickly added.

"You've got a mean streak in you," Leia remarked with a helpless sigh.

"Toward Jaina or toward you?" Luke asked, and again, Leia and Han could hear their sister-in-law laughing.

"Yes!" Mara answered.

Leia just sighed.

"If anything happens to Mistress Jaina, I shall personally scold Artoo Detoo," a nervous C-3PO piped in. "Oh, he's the real troublemaker, you know. I am sure that he is quite enjoying this."

Leia glanced at the golden protocol droid. "Not like Mara," she muttered, and considering her present fears and feelings, she was only half kidding.

"Jaina's fine," Luke remarked. "If you reach out with the Force, dear sister, you'll feel her, very much alive and well."

Leia was about to do just that, but she didn't have to, for the sensors on the *Falcon's* panel beeped, and sure enough, Jaina's X-wing streaked into view a moment later.

"Took you long enough," Mara called to her, and she left the channel open so that the folks on the *Falcon* could hear her as well.

"A little problem with Artoo," Jaina remarked dryly, and they heard R2-D2 beep out his vehement protest.

Mara bade Jaina to take them in, and she did just that, but in a roundabout manner, circling wide of Lando's home planet of Dubrillion to take a look at the operations going on at the other planet, Destrillion. A stream of small ships flowed down to this planet, bringing raw minerals from the asteroids to the great processing plants Lando had set up. Another, smaller stream of larger ships flowed off world, heading for the huge freighters that were sitting in orbit.

All the onlookers, even Han, who was so familiar with Lando's schemes, stared in disbelief. How could Lando have set up so complete and large an operation in so short a time? He'd only been out here for a year, and yet it seemed as if his operations could supply half the galaxy!

Contact from the surface of the blue and green planet welcomed them—all the more enthusiastically after the controller heard the names of the ships and their occupants—and gave them coordinates for landing. As they descended through Dubrillion's cloud cover, they saw that Lando's current home was no less impressive than his mining operation. The city was tightly clustered, with tall towers and high groupings of many starports. Luke noted that most of those open bays were empty, leading to the speculation that Lando entertained many guests who were quick in and quick out.

Such as smugglers.

As the *Jade Sabre* swooped along for its appointed dock,

Luke also noted a pair of X-wings on one platform—XJ class, like his own, the latest version of the starfighter. There weren't many of those advanced fighters flying about, and none at all outside the Star Destroyer and battle cruiser squadrons, with one notable exception. These fighters belonged to Jedi Knights.

The three ships set down on three circular bays, high above the surface, with low clouds drifting by. The landing zones were separated by narrow walkways leading to a central hub, and a fourth walkway went out from that hub to the connected tower.

All of them disembarked and met at the central hub. Jaina and R2-D2, who needed considerable help getting out of the X-wing, came along last. The pair arrived just before Lando came sweeping out of the tower door, wearing his huge welcoming smile, his eyes, as always, twinkling more than sparkling, giving the impression that something much more was going on behind the man's every gesture and expression.

"Ha-ha!" he laughed, moving over to wrap Han in a great hug, and then he put one over Leia—one that pointedly lasted a little bit longer, drawing a jealous scowl from Han. He went to Luke next and then stood before Mara, shaking his head. "You look wonderful!" he said sincerely, bringing a smile to the woman, and Lando crushed her in a huge hug.

"Not many people dare to hug me," Mara remarked.

"That leaves more of you for me, then!" Lando returned with a burst of laughter. He stopped abruptly and glanced over at Luke, but found the man nodding and smiling sincerely. Lando's greeting of Mara could not have been more perfect.

The man was much more reserved with Chewbacca, offered a salute to R2-D2 and C-3PO, and then turned his attention to the three kids.

"How much bigger are you gonna get?" he asked, holding his arms out wide in disbelief. "It's only been a year, but look at you! You're all grown up."

The smiles that came back at him were polite, and obviously embarrassed.

"What're you doing here?" Lando asked, turning to Han. "And why didn't you tell me you'd be coming? I could have prepared something."

"Somehow, I don't think we'll be bored," Han remarked dryly.

Lando chuckled, but stopped short, eyeing Han suspiciously, as if he didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or an insult. His bright smile returned almost immediately, though, and with a flourish and a skip in his step, the vibrant Lando led them into the tower. He gave them the complete tour then, from the posh rooms in his guest suites to the control rooms of the robotic processing plants on the other planet, detailing with great pride the volumes of various minerals making their way up to the freighters and off to the Core. They ended the tour in the huge monitoring chamber at the center of his city, an oval-

shaped room, its perimeter mimicking the orbital path of the asteroid belt, Lando's Folly. The chamber walls were covered with one gigantic viewscreen, showing a real-time view of the asteroid belt. Lando led them to another large rectangular screen, set out from one wall, and the man at the control panel moved aside.

Lando's ensuing demonstration did not disappoint. He selected a section of the asteroid belt and magnified it on the rectangular screen to the point where they could see the small robotic mining ships testing, drilling, and extracting, then hopping on to another asteroid.

"How much can you get from them?" Han asked. "Really?"

"Most asteroids aren't profitable," Lando admitted. "But every now and then . . ." he added slyly, rubbing his hands together, dark eyes twinkling.

He continued the demonstration a bit longer, answered questions about volume and costs of setup, then led them out of that tower to another, up, up to an enclosed hangar that held several small craft with single central pilot pods. Wing pylons extended from either side, connecting solar array wings that featured a top third and bottom third angled at forty-five degrees back in toward the central pod.

Lando's guests, particularly the older ones, surely recognized the craft: TIE Advanced x1 fighters, the type favored by the elite of the old Empire, including Darth Vader. The sight of the distinctive fighters clearly affected both Luke and Leia, whose expressions drooped. Han looked at Lando and scowled.

"Best design for our purposes," Lando answered honestly.

"These are your belt runners?" Luke asked.

"It's the adjustable shock couch," Lando explained, leading the way to the nearest, and as they moved they noted similar, but larger, twin-pod craft, TIE bombers, farther back in the hangar. "Pilots in these things can take a real beating."

"Don't we know that?" Han asked dryly.

"So you fly these things through the asteroid belt?" Jaina asked, her expression and her tone showing that she was more than a little intrigued.

"Along Lando's Folly, not through," Lando corrected. "Against the flow of the asteroids. We've got a couple of particularly nasty sections mapped out." He stared at Jaina for a long moment, matching her eager expression. "You want to try?"

She looked at her parents first, for just a moment, and then at Mara, and it was obvious that she was pleading for permission.

THE PREP TIME SEEMED interminable to eager Jaina, but she paid attention as Lando's technicians explained the basic differences in flying one of their modified TIE fighters. While the foot yokes and hand controls were easy enough to pick up, the adjustable shock couch, a pivoting,

bouncing contraption, was very different from the stable cockpit of an X-wing or a Landspeeder. And the most important difference of all, Lando's technician had explained, concerned the inertial compensator. Unlike those on the X-wings and in most other craft, the ones on the modified TIE fighters could not be dialed down. The levels were preset, designed to give a pilot a good tactical feel of the craft, and often a wild ride, but would not allow the Gs to exceed safe limits.

"Early on, pilots would strap in and dial it down to ninety-five," the technician explained to the three kids. "They'd bounce along until that inevitable collision, and then ricochet into a wild spin. We'd go get them, to find most unconscious. One almost died."

That last statement brought a concerned look from Leia, and Jaina knew that her mother was almost ready to cancel the

"SO YOU FLY THESE THINGS THROUGH THE ASTEROID BELT?" JAINA ASKED, HER EXPRESSION AND HER TONE SHOWING THAT SHE WAS MORE THAN A LITTLE INTRIGUED.

runs then and there.

But then the technician assured her, and the others, that the problem had been fixed. "When you hit one now, you'll get the spin of your life," he explained. "But you'll live to brag about it."

As a final confidence booster, the technician then pointed out the repulsor shields, solid defensive arrays controlled not by the pilot and powered not by the ship's engines, but from a floating station, *Belt-Runner I*.

That news widened Luke's eyes. Available technologies could make the TIE fighters able to withstand any asteroid hits, combinations of shields and an enhanced repulsor system, but for many years, the militaries of both the Empire and the New Republic had been trying to perfect off-ship shielding, with greater power sources lending deflector shields to small starfighters, thus freeing the drives of the starfighters for the tasks of maneuvering, accelerating, and firing. Thus far, little progress had been made with the technique, and Luke understood that if Lando could perfect it out here, the value to the enterprising man would be many times greater than all the treasure he could leech off all the asteroids of Lando's Folly. Maybe that was his real purpose.

"Also," the technician continued, moving over to pat a shining white metallic hump beside the shock couch, "these babies have been outfitted with hyperdrive."

Luke nodded admiringly. Lando and his technicians might be on to something truly impressive here.

"We'll keep them safe," Lando finished for the tech, and he offered a wink to Leia.

And then Jaina and the other two Solo youngsters took

their test runs in the modified TIEs, including a half-speed crash into a mountainside, where they experienced their first real feel for the collision shields.

But even that exercise hadn't sated Jaina. Lando had shown them a posting board prominently displayed in the entry hall of the city's main tower, which listed the top pilots and their winning durations. She didn't know any of the names, except two: Miko Reilia, who was listed at seventh, and Kyp Durrón, the current champion, with a time of eleven minutes, thirteen-point-two-five seconds.

Jedi Knights, the master Kyp and his apprentice Miko.

Jaina had work to do.

She cruised within the prep coordinates in her TIE fighter now, within sight of the entry point to the asteroid belt. Jacen was in the run now, building a respectable time approaching the five-minute mark. Jaina couldn't see him, but she heard his calls—or at least, the calls out to him, for her twin brother was keeping fairly quiet, finding a sense of calm within the meditation of the Force, she knew.

He passed the five-and-a-half-minute mark—he'd be on the board.

"Keep going," Jaina whispered, but even as the words left her mouth, she heard her brother cry out, "Whoa!" and then just issue a long scream.

"He's out!" came the call from *Belt-Runner I*. "Heck of a hit."

Jaina caught sight of him then, of the spinning running lights as the TIE fighter careened off into space. "Jacen?" she called out, and when no response came back, she reached out to her twin with the Force, feeling him securely through their tight bond and understanding that he was shaken up, but was very much alive and well.

She let it go at that, for Anakin was just starting his run. Jaina caught flashes of his ship weaving in and out of the rocks, and she heard his breathing and occasional shouts

ANAKIN WAS JUST STARTING HIS RUN. JAINA
CAUGHT FLASHES OF HIS SHIP WEAVING IN
AND OUT OF THE ROCKS, AND SHE HEARD HIS
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over her comm unit. He sounded more animated than had Jacen, more consciously attuned to his physical senses. Jaina understood the philosophical fight that had been waging between her brothers, each trying to find the correct balance between Force and physiology, and she wasn't surprised at all by the difference.

"We got him," came the call from one of Lando's tow ships, followed by assurances from Jacen that he was all right. Jaina could picture the look of relief on her fretting mother's face.

"I want to do it again," he added, and then Jaina imagined Leia's predictable scowl.

They crossed Jaina's line of sight then, TIE and tow ship. The modified fighter seemed perfectly fine, but still it was being towed, giving Jaina an idea of just how shaken her brother had been. She took a deep breath, steadying her nerves.

Then she heard Anakin squeal with delight, and caught sight of his TIE skimming the edge of one huge rock.

She clicked off the signal, preferring to turn her attention inward, to find the peace of the Force, the calm emptiness. Hardly conscious of the effort, she rocked the foot yokes back and forth, trying to get a better feel for the craft, and gave a quick push on the throttle, jerking her back in the shock couch.

The seconds slipped past as she fell deeper into the meditation.

She heard the call from the ground controller that Anakin had surpassed Jacen—wouldn't that make for fun conversation later on?—and focused back in to her surroundings, tuning the comm to Anakin's signal in time to hear his boast.

"I got you, Jac—" he started to say.

Jaina saw the whole thing. Anakin stooped his TIE under a spinning rock, then pulled into a hard climb right before the face of another.

He couldn't avoid the third, didn't even see it until it was right in his face.

He hit head-on, the TIE fighter ricocheting straight up, spinning tail over front at a tremendous rate. Up, up it went, and then it stopped spinning—Anakin must have fired a compensating blast—and just kept drifting, tilted and appearing quite dead.

"Anakin?" came the frantic call from the ground station—Leia's voice.

No answer.

Jaina gripped her controls as Leia cried out again, thinking that she could get to her brother quickest, though what good she might do, she didn't know. Before she fired away, though, Anakin's shaky voice replied.

"Amazing," he said, and he sounded sick, or as if he had just been.

"Are you all right?" came Leia's call and Lando's voice at the same time.

"I think so."

"You beat Jacen," Jaina piped in.

"Who cares?" came the response.

Only then did Jaina understand how shaken her little brother truly was. Normally, the fact that he had beaten Jacen would be paramount in his thoughts, a sterling victory.

"That's enough," Leia said, apparently catching on to the same thing. "Bring it in, Jaina."

"Ready to fire!" Jaina called, clicking to a different channel and pretending she hadn't heard. She wasn't about to let Anakin's misfortune slow her down—she knew she should have gone first! "Am I cleared for entry?" she asked the air

controller on *Belt-Runner I*.

"Fire away," he came back.

"Jaina!" Leia's voice came in as her mom easily found her daughter's new channel.

But Jaina throttled up quickly, speeding for the entry point of the belt. Most pilots went in at a virtual standstill, coming against the flow of the asteroids and using their drives only for dodging maneuvers. It wasn't a distance test, after all, but merely a duration challenge.

Jaina, though, fearing her mother would find a way to call it all off, hit the belt running . . . and fast.

She knew as soon as she entered that she had made a mistake. Before she could even really register any pattern to the incoming asteroids, she had to push hard on the stick, dropping the TIE into a straight stoop, then rolling out to the left desperately to avoid a long jag in the rock. Three-quarters of the way into that roll, Jaina pulled it to a halt and shot out diagonally, barely avoiding another asteroid and nearly clipping the back side of the first she had dodged. No time to take a deep, steadying breath, for another pair came on, and Jaina put the TIE up on its side and somehow managed to slip between them, then rolled it over, top down, and pulled hard, dropping into another stoop. Before the warning alarm could begin to sound, indicating that she was nearing the boundary of the belt, Jaina brought the TIE about, shooting off to the side and making no headway into the asteroid course, but not losing any ground—which would have disqualified her—and buying herself a precious split-second.

And in that second, she composed herself and recognized that she could not keep reacting. This was a game of anticipation, of preparing the move before you had to make it. That was why the four Jedi who had run, including two relatively green pilots, her brothers, had all climbed onto the board. Jaina ignored her blinking and beeping instruments and looked ahead at the incoming swarm, feeling the pattern as much as seeing it.

She "turned her nose into the wind," as the old water sailing adage went, and plunged in headlong.

HAN HEARD a low growl escape Leia's lips as Jaina soared into the asteroid belt. He draped his arm about his wife's shoulders.

"She heard me," Leia remarked quietly and coldly.

Han tightened his grip, pulling Leia closer. Of course Jaina had heard her, and of course Jaina had pretended differently, had gone after the run that had consumed her thoughts these last days. Leia would get over it, Han knew, but if Jaina had acceded to her mother's demand, had lost the challenge she had so desperately wanted, the chill between mother and daughter would have been lasting.

"She'll be all right," he remarked, but even he winced as Jaina's TIE, clearly visible on the great screens in the central control room, broke into its three-quarter roll and burst out at the very last instant. "She's the best flyer of the three."

Beside the pair, Mara's green eyes glowed with excitement. "Fall into it, Jaina," she whispered. "Let the Force be your guide."

Behind her, Luke kneaded her neck and shoulders and smiled warmly, remembering similar advice from the spirit of Obi-Wan Kenobi, when old Ben had gone with him on his race down the channel of the Death Star. Don't try to register all the input from your eyes and other senses. Don't listen to your instruments at all—turn them off, if possible. Let the Force show you the patterns before you, the twists, the turns, the target.

Jaina was more into that flow now, they could all see, her turns coming hard but less drastic, as if she was anticipating the next twist she would face.

Luke glanced at the timer clock hanging above them. Four minutes.

On she went, spinning and rolling, plunging suddenly, then swooping back up to a clearer region. But, looking ahead of her, Luke recognized a seemingly insurmountable problem. Two thick clusters of asteroids were converging, the trailing group catching up to the other, and they seemed as if they would form a wall of stone the TIE simply couldn't slip through.

"Unbreachable pattern!" one of Lando's observing judges cried out, and those very words blinked off and on across his monitor, for the computer calculating Jaina's flight saw no way around the forming barrier without clearing the borderlines of the asteroid belt.

"Tough luck," Lando remarked. "Happens every once in a while."

"She'll get it," Mara insisted.

"Come on, Jaina," Leia whispered beside her.

JAINA RECOGNIZED the convergence, like fingers interlocking to form a solid barrier, and immediately throttled down. Desperate, she glanced all about, looking for a seam.

There wasn't one.

She looked to her instruments, all of them screaming and blinking, warning of impending collision. She punched her fist against her thigh in frustration, losing her composure, losing any chance.

But then she heard Mara's plea for her to fall into the Force, and she heard her mother's voice, nothing distinct, but a general feeling of support and love from both of them.

Jaina steeled her gaze straight ahead and throttled up, attacking the mass. She had to buy time, nothing more; then the trailing group would surpass the first, and openings would reveal themselves.

She went in hard at the closest asteroid, spun over and down as she approached, and popped her repulsor coils, bouncing off harmlessly. Into another spin, she fired the repulsors again, ricocheting off the bottom of another asteroid. And then again, bouncing her backward—but not technically flying backward, which would have disqualified her.

And so it went, with Jaina playing like a bouncing ball,

never impacting but firing her repulsor coils at precisely the right moment to launch her sidelong, or up or down, or even backward, buying time and not distance as asteroids passed others, as some collided and went spinning at slightly new angles.

Jaina felt an opening, like a breeze finding an alley between tall buildings. She bounced away from yet another rock, barrel rolled and dove, then reversed momentum, swooping up right before yet another asteroid, but coming around it, leveling off and shooting through the gap, wagging her wings to accommodate the angled exit.

Her eyes were half closed as she felt the patterns; her TIE fighter swooped and turned, accelerating and throttling back before she was even conscious of the movements.

Nor was she conscious of the passing seconds, or of anything at all other than the clearest course before her.

CHEWIE'S HOWL as Jaina broke through the seemingly

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impenetrable barrier, against the odds and against the computer calculations, very much reflected the mood of the onlookers, even Lando's crew. The Wookiee jumped up and down, grabbed the nearest technician and gave him a shake that set his teeth to rattling, and punched his huge, hairy fist into the air.

"Was that good?" C-3PO asked in all seriousness, apparently missing the point of it all.

R2-D2 howled and screeched at him in response.

Leia reached over and squeezed Mara's hand.

"The kid can fly," Han remarked, his voice thick with something more than pride, with awe. He glanced up at the timer clock.

Five minutes, thirty-two seconds.

Jacen, still a bit unsteady from his collision, walked into the room then. He glanced up at the clock, then moved beside the others and took a measure of Jaina's progress. "She's found her inner peace," he remarked.

"Did you?" Luke asked.

Jacen nodded. "But I didn't have the flying skills to complement it," he admitted. "Jaina's got the whole package."

And so it seemed, as the screen showed her TIE flowing effortlessly through the maze of flying boulders.

The elapsed time broke the seven-minute mark, putting Jaina high on the board.

"She'll be no lower than third," Lando told them. "And no one's had a tougher course to fly." He turned to one of his techs. "Cut into all the broadcast screens," he instructed. "Put this out all over the planet."

"Let the betting begin," Han whispered into Leia's ear,

and both smiled.

"I already had it piped in to the other control rooms and the docking areas," the tech replied.

"I saw it on the way in," Jacen agreed. "Kyp Durrón's out in the docks, watching every second."

The name reminded Luke that they had other business to attend to out here. But not now, he told himself. He studied Jaina's flight pattern, then glanced back up at the timer clock. "Kyp's going to lose," he stated evenly.

THE FORCE MOUNTED within Jaina, a tangible pressure growing from second to second. It was all an incomprehensible blur, seemingly unguided movements that brought her within a hair's breadth of some asteroids, into wild turns and stoops, straight climbs and clever angles cutting the one open line between rocks.

On and on it went, though time seemed irrelevant, a concept lost in the deepest trance.

But the pressure built, surely, tangibly, and as Jaina became aware of it, that only stemmed her concentration further.

Her eyes popped open wide as she came around one spinning boulder to nick a tiny one, hardly a hit, but enough to push her out so that she clipped another, larger asteroid.

Around and around she careened, and she tensed coming out of one spin to see a wall of stone looming before her.

Then she was spinning too fast to even register the movement, too fast to make any sense of the myriad images flashing before her. She collided with another asteroid—she felt that impact clearly—and then . . .

She was clear of the belt, and as her rattled senses settled, she worked the controls feverishly to stop the spin. She didn't know how much time had elapsed, hardly remembered her run at all.

IN THE CONTROL ROOM, there was silence.

Stunned silence. The time clock had stopped the moment Jaina's TIE had exited the belt.

Twenty-seven minutes, twenty-seven seconds.

"The kid can fly," Han said again. 🗡️



about the author

R.A. Salvatore has been a fan of the Force for most of his adult life. For more about this amazing author, see the interview starting on the next page.

about the illustrator

Cliff Nielsen is well known for his book illustrations for The X-Files and The Crow, and for various DC Comics and Marvel Comics projects.

His artwork has embellished the work of nearly a hundred authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, Chris Carter, Robert Heinlein, Madeleine L'Engle, Kevin J. Anderson, and R.L. Stine.



An Interview with R. A. Salvatore

by p a m e l a m o h a n

On *Star Wars*, Fantasy, and Teenagers



Can you imagine
someone offering
you a chance to
write the newest
chapter in the
Star Wars saga?
Neither could
Bob.

BOB SALVATORE VIVIDLY RECALLS being hit by a powerful force when he was still in his teens.

"I remember going into the theater—it was packed, of course—and the only seats open were in the front row. . . . As the opening sequence played, my eyes widened and I said, 'Cool.' I was hooked from the start."

The opening sequence that caught Salvatore's eye and kept him mesmerized until the final credits rolled was the beginning of *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Salvatore instantly saw that the epic adventure would be a monumental hit and an enduring classic. What he didn't know as he slumped his eighteen-year-old frame down in the front row seat of the movie theater was that sixteen years later he would be asked to write *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order—Vector Prime*, a new novel based on the continuing *Star Wars* universe.

"Are you kidding?" Salvatore said when asked if he'd even fantasized about such a possibility. "Never in my wildest dreams! I thought I'd be writing computer manuals for a living. This has all been an accident, a *really good accident*," he said.

When you look at Salvatore's past writing successes, it's easy to see that it was no accident that Lucasfilm and Del Rey Books chose him as the author to launch a new adventure in the continuing saga. As a best-selling author of fantasy fiction, Salvatore is well known in the entertainment industry. Twenty-six of his books have been published—six of which have made the *New*

York Times bestseller list—and, in addition to his new *Star Wars* novel, two other titles are due to be released in the fall.

Still, he says, his audience has been "fairly restricted" because of the genre he has chosen to write in. "Fantasy isn't for everyone. Some people think they are too grounded for it. But they don't question the Force, and it's the same thing in a different format."

Because *Star Wars* is a popular topic, Salvatore said, many of his friends who have never read his writing will now be reading one of his books. And reaction in his hometown of Leominster, Mass., to his commission to write *Vector Prime* has been "interesting. People are coming up to me and congratulating me on having made it to the big time. I've been in the business for a long time, but their perception of me has changed. Before, I was just the guy who wrote twenty-six books. Now I'm the guy who landed a *Star Wars* book. In a way, it's intimidating," he said.

Salvatore began writing for publication in 1982. He sold his first book, *The Crystal Shard*, which was set in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® shared world, in 1988. That book, published by TSR, Inc., climbed to the number two spot on the Waldenbooks bestseller list. The second and third books in what became The Icewind Dale trilogy—*Streams of Silver* and *The Halfling's Gem*—also did well. In 1990 *The Halfling's Gem* became Salvatore's first book to make the *New York Times* bestseller list.

It was about that time that Salvatore

An Interview with R. A. Salvatore

decided to quit his day job. "I was in a bad working situation and decided it was time to take a chance and quit." He has never regretted taking that gamble. Soon after becoming a full-time author, Salvatore began writing the popular Dark Elf series, published by TSR, Inc. His more recent epic, the Demon Wars trilogy, is available in hardcover from Del Rey.

Salvatore said he was honored to have been chosen as the first writer in Del Rey's new *Star Wars* publishing program. He also was apprehensive.

"I think the first time I really understood what I had gotten myself into was when I was at a Chicago comic book convention last year and they had a signing (autograph) booth with the guy who wore the R2-D2 costume in the movie, as well as a couple of other people who had played minor roles. They were charging six dollars for an autograph, and the line was huge! People stood in line for hours. I looked at (Del Rey editor) Shelly Shapiro and asked: 'What the heck did I get myself into?' I think that's when it hit me how huge *Star Wars* really is," he said.

In addition to knowing he was going to write a novel based on what is arguably the most popular box-office hit of all time, Salvatore also suffered some anxiety because he had not kept up with the continuing story portrayed in the *Star Wars* novels that came after *Return of the Jedi*.

"When I was brought in, my concern was that I hadn't read the novels. I had been so involved in trying to keep up with the worlds I was working in that I hadn't had time to sit down and read the (*Star Wars*) novels."

Salvatore's good friend and *Star Wars* novelist Michael Stackpole suggested which he should read first in order to get a handle on characters and plot elements introduced after the third movie. Salvatore also read the *Star Wars Encyclopedia* by Stephen J. Sansweet—a resource guide he refers to as a "wonderful source"—as well as the four *Star Wars* guidebooks.

"I went through them, just looking, getting different ideas. That gave me enough of the mechanical background to

be able to write the book."

Salvatore not only had to work within the confines of the *Star Wars* technology, which was a little more restrictive than in the worlds he invented himself, but also had to use characters that someone else had already created. He was used to inventing his own in his other books. He did, however, get to create one of the book's minor heroes and all of its villains and their biological weapons.

Although it was a different adventure for a writer who was accustomed to following the beat of his own creative drum, Salvatore said he understood



'What the heck did I get myself into?'

▲ ABOVE: At the recent *Star Wars* Celebration in Denver, Salvatore and Episode I author Terry Brooks pose with Darth Maul—er, no, that's fan Doug Brown. ▲ ABOVE RIGHT: Bob was happy to sign an attendee's tattoo, which was inspired by his Dark Elf fantasy series.

his role from the beginning. "The purpose of this book was not for me to start a story that I would continue; it was for me to start certain aspects in a certain realm so that others could continue it."

In addition to getting caught up on his *Star Wars* reading in preparation for writing *Vector Prime*, Salvatore also sat down and watched the original three *Star Wars* movies over again.

"When characters in a book talk, you should hear them sing. When you hear Han Solo talk in the book, you should be

able to see the smirk on his face," he said.

Salvatore watched the movies closely, he said, in order to memorize the voices of the characters he wanted others to "hear" in his book. "When you listen to the movies, the voices are very real and become ingrained in your head. It wasn't



hard for me to get the voices right, particularly with the main characters who were in the movies."

One character who was particularly easy for Salvatore to portray was Han Solo, who is now forty-something and the father of three teenagers. The author, who also is forty-something and the father of three teenagers said he, like Solo, spends a lot of time with his children. Of course, their times together are much less adventurous than those of the movie character's family. But, he says, in spite of the fact that they are literally galaxies apart, he empathizes with the movie hero father.

"He's a little older than me, but I think we're at similar places in our lives," Salvatore said.

"It's funny. When I watched *Star Wars* for the first time, I empathized with Luke because I was the same age and had the same idealism, and now I'm closer to Han by far. Han's a lot cooler than I am, but I like to think I'm cool."

It's an anything but "cool" Han Solo who spews to Leia, in a scene from *Vector Prime*, "I thought we had raised our kids with more sense than to dive into an asteroid belt with a bunch of fighters chasing them!"

Of course, Leia is there to remind Han that she remembers a young man "who

once flew into an asteroid belt with a host of Imperial fighters on his tail.”

“That was different,” Dad Solo says.

But it was Dad Salvatore who put the words in Solo’s mouth. You kind of get the feeling, reading this scene, that the author has used that three-word sentence in his own life. Salvatore may not be raising Jedi Knights, but he knows the joys and frustrations all parents share.

Although relating to Solo and the challenges of parenthood was natural for Salvatore, putting the words in teenagers’ mouths was not. “The kids were the hardest to write,” he said. “I almost had to create the voices for them.

“I see so many books that are written about teenage heroes in fantasy—that’s huge. And I very rarely see them done well. I know this *because* I have teenagers: Fourteen-year-olds are a lot more savvy than most people think.”

Chewbacca probably would agree with Salvatore’s assessment of fourteen-year-olds. “Chevie” sometimes has a bit of a problem dealing with the workings of the teenage mind—and mouth. The hairy Wookiee is now sort of an “Uncle Chevie,” who plays with, protects, and occasionally scolds the Solo children.

In one scene in the book, fourteen-year-old Anakin Solo makes the grievous but eventually forgivable error of referring to Chewie’s beloved *Millennium Falcon* as “just a stupid ship.” Chewie demonstrates his displeasure by hoisting the kid up in the air with one hand, taking his lightsaber with another, and pretending to bite it, all the while making his characteristic Chewie-type howls.

“Okay, I get it,” Anakin tells the peeved copilot. The Wookiee has made his point.

Salvatore said it was tough to write about the Solo children because, even though they are Jedi Knights, they are teenagers and, as such, “a complicated group. There is a lot of frustration, a lot of idealism, a lot of self-confidence, a lot of self-doubt, all rolled into one. That makes teenagers, any teenagers, hard to write, but I love writing about them.”

Salvatore said he hopes adolescent readers “will pick up this book and read it and really identify not just with Jaina’s superb flying skills, but also with the ongoing conflict between Jacen and Anakin, or the conflict between father and son.”

Salvatore’s favorite character in *Vector Prime*, he said, is Luke’s wife, Mara Jade. “It’s surprising to me, because I didn’t even want her in the book. I thought I had too many protagonists. I usually write books with three, four, or five heroes, and in *Vector Prime* I had twelve. They were almost fighting for lines in my head. It was like they were saying: ‘Let me say something. Let me say something.’ I’d have a scene where there should have been only one main character and have to deal with four.”

Salvatore said he
hopes adolescent
readers “will pick
up this book and
read it and really
identify...”



Although the *Star Wars* universe is a “hugely different” genre for Salvatore to write in, it is not, he says, what he would consider hard science fiction. “It’s filled with wonderful technological marvels, and that would make me call it science fiction, but I think the magic of *Star Wars* is that George Lucas took science fiction and made it read like a fantasy novel. It’s a wonderful blend, if it’s done right.”

Star Wars isn’t high-tech. In fact, the new “technology” Salvatore introduces features elements of horror, fantasy, and technology. One of the criteria he was given in writing the book was to create a “brand new menace” that utilizes biotechnology. In addition, characters who oppose technology make use of biological weaponry throughout the book. “There is nothing you need to know about physics to enjoy *Star Wars*,” he said, be it the movies old or new or any of the novels. “I don’t consider *Star Wars* hard science. I think of *Star Wars* as an epic adventure.”

As such, he said, his style fit the needs of the novel.

“I have a different style than most writers. It’s quick and it’s visual. It’s a well-paced book and a fast read, which is what a *Star Wars* book has to be,” he said. Lucasfilm editors called the book “filmic,” which Salvatore said he believes is their way of saying the book is a visual read.

The author is happy with the finished work, too, he said. Still, in spite of the fact that he knows that readers will be able to “see” his battle scenes, “hear” the book’s characters—new and old—and feel their joys, triumphs, and pains, he will not know whether he has succeeded in making *Vector Prime* “everything that *Star Wars* fans want it to be” until the book is published and read.

Salvatore said he wants readers to know that this book has a special place in his heart, for several reasons. “I didn’t take this as a work-for-hire, something to fill in a couple of months. This is not a knock-off project for me in any way, shape, or form. I went after this book the way any writer goes after any book worth reading, and I took it because being part of *Star Wars* is thrilling. It goes back to the eighteen-year-old sitting in the movie theater,” he said.

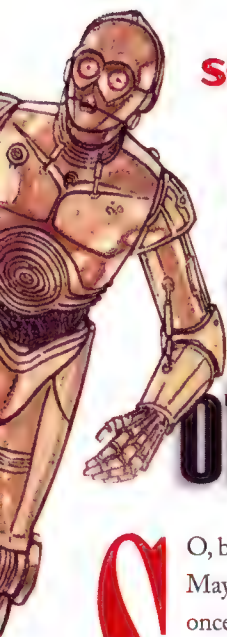
Unlike his former eighteen-year-old self, Salvatore said he does dare to wish for bigger and better things these days.

“I have a fantasy about this book. The fantasy would be that George Lucas and his people read it and say, ‘Boy, this guy really captures the movies well.’ And then they say, ‘Hey, let’s go look at Dark Elf and Demon Wars and see if there is a movie to be made.’ That would be cool! And those books would make great movies, too.”

For now, though, he says he is “just Bob. I write the books. I spend time with my family. I try to enjoy the life that fate and a little perseverance has given to me.”

About the Author

AMAZING Stories Associate Editor Pamela Mohan is a former criminal court news reporter, columnist, biographer, young adult science fiction novelist, and assistant editor of this magazine under the direction of past editor Patrick Lucien Price. She refers all questions about her relationship to current Editor-in-Chief Kim Mohan to her German shepherd, Justice, who she says isn’t talking.



Star Wars Fever

A Guide to the Fiction of Star Wars

SO, by this time you've seen *The Phantom Menace*. Maybe more than once. (Okay, *probably* more than once.) About now it's starting to dawn on you that you have *three more years* to wait before the next film's release. How will you survive? Well, your favorite galaxy far, far away is a vast place indeed—large enough to hold plenty of stories to keep the Jedi in you satisfied until Episode II debuts. Four millennia of stories, from the days of the Old Republic to the rise of the New Jedi Order, are yours to enjoy—and best of all, there's no waiting in line! The list on these pages is your guide to the world of official *Star Wars* fiction, featured in novels (in **black**) and comic books (in **blue**). The titles below appear in rough chronological order, leading up to The New Jedi Order series of novels coming later this year from Del Rey Books.

In the days of the Old Republic, thousands of years before Luke Skywalker discovers his destiny, evil Jedi champion the dark side of the Force and enslave the Sith race. In time, the true Jedi band together with the oppressed people of the Onderon System against the dark Jedi. The war ends when the Old Republic smashes the Sith Empire.

Tales of the Jedi



The Golden Age of the Sith series ▼

Kevin J. Anderson

The Fall of the Sith Empire series ▼

Kevin J. Anderson

Tales of the Jedi ▼

(*Knights of the Old Republic*) series

Tom Veitch

Tales of the Jedi: The Freedon Nadd Uprising series ▼

Tom Veitch

Dark Lords of the Sith series ▼

Tom Veitch

The Sith War series ▼

Kevin J. Anderson

Redemption series

Kevin J. Anderson

Almost four thousand years later, a new and powerful Jedi emerges: Ki-Adi-Mundi, whose agricultural world, Cerea, is isolated from the Republic. When he learns that an insidious force seeks to incite the technology-hungry young people of Cerea against their elders, Ki-Adi-Mundi must uncover the agent in time to prevent a generational war.

Star Wars Ongoing Comics

Prelude to Rebellion series

Jan Strnad

The Outlander series

Timothy Truman

EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

It is now thirty-two years before Princess Leia hides her fateful message in a now-famous R2 unit. On the desert planet of Tatooine, a young Anakin Skywalker—her father—grows strong in the Force.

Star Wars: Episode I—

The Phantom Menace ■ ● ▲ ◆

Terry Brooks (hardcover only)

Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace series ▼

Henry Gilroy

Anakin Skywalker

Timothy Truman

Obi-Wan Kenobi

Henry Gilroy

Qui-Gon Jinn

Ryder Windham

Queen Amidala

Mark Schultz

Bounty Hunters: Aurra Sing

Timothy Truman

Some twenty years later, an adult Anakin has chosen his life's path: to become the fearsome Darth Vader. Meanwhile, other familiar characters—Han Solo, Chewbacca, Jabba the Hutt, R2-D2, C-3PO, Lando Calrissian, and Boba Fett—are coming into their own.



Han Solo Adventures ▲ ▼

Brian Daley

Contains *Han Solo at Stars' End*, *Han Solo's Revenge*, and *Han Solo and the Lost Legacy*

Droids (The Kalarba

Adventures, Rebellion) series ▼ ◆

Dan Thorland and

Ryder Windham

Jabba the Hutt (The Art of the Deal) ▼

The Garr Suppoon Hit

Jim Woodring

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

Jim Woodring

The Dynasty Trap

Jim Woodring

Betrayal

Jim Woodring

Adventures of Lando Calrissian ▼

L. Neil Smith

Boba Fett—Enemy of the Empire series

John Wagner

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare ■

A. C. Crispin

The Hutt Gambit ■

A. C. Crispin

Rebel Dawn ■

A. C. Crispin



It was a dark time for the rebellion.... Well, you know the rest.

Star Wars: A New Hope ▲ ◆

George Lucas

Vader's Quest series

Darko Macan

Classic Star Wars: The Early Adventures series ▼

Russ Manning

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Kevin J. Anderson (ed.)

Nightly, the Lover's Tale ■ ●

Barbara Hambly (audio only)

Story from *Mos Eisley* anthology

We Don't Do Weddings:

The Band's Tale ■

Kathleen Tyers (audio only)

Story from *Mos Eisley* anthology

Tales from Mos Eisley

Bruce Jones

Splinter of the Mind's Eye ▲

Alan Dean Foster

River of Chaos series

Louise Simonson

Classic Star Wars (In Deadly Pursuit, The Rebel Storm, Escape to Hoth) series ▼

Archie Goodwin

Classic Star Wars: Devilworlds ▼

Various authors

Shadow Stalker series

Ryder Windham



Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back ◆ ▲

Donald F. Glut

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

Kevin J. Anderson (ed.)

Bounty Hunters: Classic Era

Author TBA

Dark Forces Graphic Story Album Trilogy

Soldier for the Empire ▼

William C. Dietz

Rebel Agent ▼

William C. Dietz

Jedi Knight ▼

William C. Dietz

Bounty Hunter Wars

The Mandalorian Armor ■

K. W. Jeter

Slave Ship ■

K. W. Jeter

Hard Merchandise ■

K. W. Jeter

Shadows of the Empire ▲ ■

Steve Perry



Star Wars: Return of the Jedi ◆ ▲

James Kahn

Tales from Jabba's Palace

Kevin J. Anderson (ed.)





**Jabba the Hutt:
The Jabba Tape**
John Wagner
The Truce at Bakura ■ ◆
Kathleen Tyers

Mara Jade Comics
By the Emperor's Hand series ▼
Timothy Zahn and
Michael A. Stackpole

**Shadows of the Empire:
Evolution** series
Steve Perry
**Classic Star Wars:
The Vandelhelm
Mission**
Archie Goodwin



In the years following the destruction of the Empire's second Death Star, Luke Skywalker's own Rogue Squadron embarks upon espionage missions and seeks to eradicate the remnants of the Imperial forces.

X-Wing Series
Rogue Squadron ■
Michael A. Stackpole
Wedge's Gamble ■
Michael A. Stackpole
The Krytos Trap ■
Michael A. Stackpole
The Bacta War ■
Michael A. Stackpole
Wrath Squadron ■
Aaron Allston
Iron Fist ■
Aaron Allston
Solo Command ■
Aaron Allston
Isard's Revenge ■
Michael A. Stackpole



**X-Wing Rogue
Squadron**
The Rebel Opposition series
Michael A. Stackpole and
Mike Brown
The Phantom Affair series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole and
Darko Macan
Battleground: Tatooine series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole and
Jan Strnad
The Warrior Princess series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole and
Scott Tolson
Requiem for a Rogue series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole and
Jan Strnad
In the Empire's Service series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole
The Making of Baron Fel
Michael A. Stackpole
Family Ties series
Michael A. Stackpole
Masquerade series
Michael A. Stackpole

Mandatory Retirement series
Michael A. Stackpole
Blood and Honor series ▼
Michael A. Stackpole

**Boba Fett: Twin Engines of
Destruction**
Andy Mangles
Bounty Hunters: Post-Classic Era
Author TBA

Han Solo and Princess Leia wed, but before they can live happily ever after, Imperial Grand Admiral Thrawn returns from deep space to threaten the New Republic. While the Empire gains strength from the power of the dark Jedi, new heroes rise to champion the light, including Jacen and Jaina Solo, the twin children of Han and Leia.

The Courtship of Princess Leia ■ ◆
Dave Wolverton

The Thrawn Trilogy
Heir to the Empire ■ ◆ ▲
Timothy Zahn
Dark Force Rising ■ ◆ ▲
Timothy Zahn
The Last Command ■ ◆ ▲
Timothy Zahn

While the Solo children—including Anakin, the youngest—grow strong in the Force, Luke battles the allure of the dark side. Seeking a return to glory, the enemies of the New Republic clone the deceased Emperor.



Dark Empire I and II series ▼ ◆
Tom Veitch

**Boba Fett (Death, Lies
& Treachery)** ▼
Bounty on Bar-Kooda
John Wagner

When the Fat Lady Sings
John Wagner
Murder Most Foul
John Wagner

Following the death of the Emperor, the Empire's ruling Interim Council finds itself the target of assassinations and mayhem. All the while, Imperial forces hunt down the last member of the Emperor's elite Crimson Guard.

Empire's End series ▼
Tom Veitch
Crimson Empire series ▼
Mike Richardson
and Randy Stradley
**Crimson Empire II—
Council of Blood** series
Mike Richardson and
Randy Stradley



After the attempts to revive the Emperor collapse, Luke finds a Jedi training academy to help a new generation of heroes discover the power of the Force.

**Jedi Academy
Trilogy**
Jedi Search ■
Kevin J. Anderson
Dark Apprentice ■
Kevin J. Anderson
Champions of the Force ■
Kevin J. Anderson

Jedi Academy—Leviathan series
Kevin J. Anderson
I, Jedi ■ ◆
Michael A. Stackpole
Children of the Jedi ■ ◆
Barbara Hambly
Darksaber ■
Kevin J. Anderson
Planet of Twilight ■ ◆
Barbara Hambly
The Crystal Star ■ ◆
Vonda N. McIntyre

The Black Fleet Crisis
Before the Storm ■
Michael Kube-McDowell
Shield of Lies ■
Michael Kube-McDowell
Tyrant's Test ■
Michael Kube-McDowell

The New Rebellion ■ ◆
Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Some two decades after their parents' fateful meeting on the Death Star, the Solo children help Han thwart his revolutionary cousin, Thrawn Sal-Solo, who plots to take control of the Corellian sector.

Corellian Trilogy
Ambush at Corellia ■
Roger MacBride Allen
Assault at Selonia ■
Roger MacBride Allen
Showdown at Centerpoint ■
Roger MacBride Allen

Hand of Thrawn
Specter of the Past ■ ◆
Timothy Zahn
Vision of the Future ■ ◆
Timothy Zahn (hardcover only)

Throughout the Eras
Tales from the Empire
Peter Schweighofer (ed.)
Star Wars Anthology
Various authors

Finally, twenty years after the demise of Darth Vader and the birth of the New Republic, a new chapter of the saga begins.

The New Jedi Order
Vector Prime ◆ (November)
R. A. Salvatore (hardcover only)
(For a sneak preview of this novel, followed by an interview with the author, see page 20.)

About This Guide

This guide lists only fiction published through October 1999. Due to space constraints, it does not include screenplays, radio dramatizations, nonfiction, juvenile novels, or art books.

Books are mass-market paperback editions unless otherwise noted. Comic-book or graphic-novel originals appear in blue.

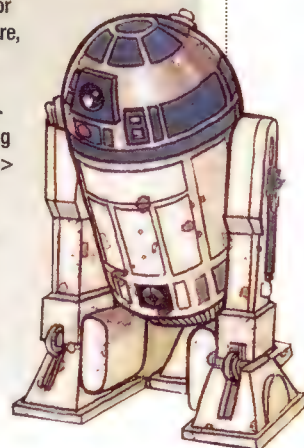
Key to Icons

- Available on audiocassette from Bantam Doubleday Dell Audio
- Available on audio CD from Random House Audiobooks
- ◆ Available in hardcover
- ▼ Also in trade paperback format
- ▲ Also in comic book/graphic novel format

Online Information

For more information about the timeline of the *Star Wars* saga, and for details on many of the titles listed here, check out these handy sites:

- Del Rey Books
<www.randomhouse.com/delrey>
- Random House online book catalog
<www.randomhouse.com/catalog>
- Dark Horse Comics
<www.darkhorse.com>
- Amazon's *Star Wars* headquarters
<www.amazon.com>
- *Star Wars* official website
<www.starwars.com>
- *Star Wars* Mos Espa Marketplace
<<http://mosespa.starwars.com>>





No one visits Sidri Akarak if he can help it. What does this disagreeable world have to teach someone as sophisticated as a traveler?

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

"ARE WE ALL READY, THEN?" Nikomastir asks. He has fashioned a crown of golden protopetaloids for himself, and gleaming scarlet baubles dangle from his ears: the bright translucent shells of galgalids, strung on slender strands of pure gold. His long, pale arms wave in the air as though he is conducting a symphony orchestra. "Our next destination is—" and he makes us wait for the announcement. And wait. And wait.

"Sidri Akarak," says Mayfly, giggling.

"How did you know?" cries Nikomastir. "Sidri Akarak! Yes! Yes! Set your coordinates, everybody! Off we go! Sidri Akarak it is!"

A faint yelp of dismay comes from Velimyle, and she shoots me a look of something that might almost have been

Sidri Akarak, though—

The four of us have been to so many wondrous lovely places together: Elang-Lo and the floating isle of Vont, and Mikni and Chchikkikan, Heidoth and Thant, Milpar, Librot, Froidis, Smoor, Xamur and Iriarte and Nabomba Zom, and on and on and on. And now—Sidri Akarak? Sidri Akarak?

WE STAND in a circle in the middle of a field of grass with golden blades, making ourselves ready for our relay-sweep departure from Galgala.

I wouldn't have minded remaining here a few months longer. A lovely world indeed is Galgala the golden, where a myriad of auriferous microorganisms excrete atoms of gold as metabolic waste. It is everywhere on this planet, the lustrous pretty metal. It turns the rivers and streams to streaks of yellow flame and the seas to shimmering golden mirrors. Huge filters are deployed at the intake valve of Galgala's reservoirs to strain the silt of dissolved gold from the water supply. The plants of Galgala are turgid in every tissue, leaf and stem and root, with aureous particles. Gold dust, held in suspension in the air, transforms the clouds to golden fleece.

Therefore the once-precious stuff has grievously lost value throughout the galaxy since Galgala was discovered, and on Galgala itself a pound of gold is worth less than a pound of soap. But I understand very little about these economic matters and care even less. Only a miser could fail to rejoice in Galgala's luminous beauty. We have been here six weeks; we have awakened each morning to the tinkle of golden chimes, we have bathed in the golden rivers and come forth shining, we have wrapped our bodies round with delicate golden chains. Now, though, it is time for us to move along, and Nikomastir has decreed that our new destination is to be one of the universe's most disagreeable worlds. Unlike my companions, I can see nothing amusing about going there. It strikes me as foolish and dangerous whimsy. But they are true sophisticates, untrammelled creatures made of air and light, and I am the leaden weight that dangles from their soaring souls. We will go to Sidri Akarak.

We all face Nikomastir. Smiling sweetly, he calls out the coordinate numbers for our journey, and we set our beacons accordingly and double-check the settings with care. We nod our readiness for departure to one another. Velimyle

Travelers

fear, though perhaps there is a certain component of perverse delight in it also. I am not at all happy about the decision myself. Sidri Akarak is a nightmare world where gaudy monsters run screaming through the muddy streets. The people of Sidri Akarak are cold and dour and inhospitable; their idea of pleasure is to wallow in discomfort and ugliness. No one goes to Sidri Akarak if he can help it, no one.

But we must live by our rules; and this day Nikomastir holds the right of next choice. It is devilish of Mayfly to have put the idea of going to Sidri Akarak into his head. But she is like that, is Mayfly. And Nikomastir is terribly easily influenced.

Will we all perish on hideous Sidri Akarak, victims of Mayfly's casual frivolity?

I don't think so, however nasty the visit turns out to be. We often get into trouble, sometimes serious trouble, but we always get out of it. We lead charmed lives, we four travelers. Someday Mayfly will take one risk too many, I suppose, and I would like not to be there when she does. Most likely I will be, though. Mayfly is my mask-sister. Wherever she goes, I go. I must look after her: thoughtful, stolid, foolish me. I must protect her from herself as we four go traveling on and on, spinning giddily across the far-flung worlds.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID DEVRIES

moves almost imperceptibly closer to me, Mayfly to Nikomastir.

I would have chosen a less flighty lover for her than Nikomastir if matters had been left to me. He is a slim, elegant youth, high-spirited and shallow, a prancing fantastico with a taste for telling elaborate, fanciful lies. And he is very young: only a single rebirth so far. Mayfly is on her fifth, as am I, and Velimyle claims three, which probably means four. Sembiran is Nikomastir's native world, a place of grand valleys and lofty snow-capped mountains and beautiful meadows and thriving cities, where his father is a minor aristocrat of some sort. Or so Nikomastir has said, although we have learned again and again that it is risky to take anything Nikomastir says at face value.

My incandescent mask-sister Mayfly, who is as small and fair as Nikomastir is tall and dark, encountered him while on a visit to Olej in the Lubrik system and was immediately captivated by his volatile, impulsive nature, and they have traveled together ever since. Whither Mayfly goeth, thither go I: That is the pledge of the mask. So do I trudge along now from world to world with them, and therefore my winsome, sly, capricious Velimyle, whose psychosensitive paintings are sought by the connoisseurs of a hundred worlds but who belongs to me alone, has willy-nilly become the fourth member of our inseparable quartet.

Some people find relay-sweep transport unlikable and even frightening, but I have never minded it. What is most bothersome, I suppose, is that no starship is involved: You travel unprotected by any sort of tangible container, a mere plummeting parcel falling in frightful solitude through the interstices of the continuum. A journey-helmet is all that covers you, and some flimsy folds of coppery mesh. You set up your coordinates, you activate your beacon, and you stand and wait, you stand and wait, until the probing beam of some far-off sweep-station intersects your position and catches you and lifts you and carries you away. If you've done things right, your baggage will be picked up and transported at the same time. Most of the time that is so.

It is a stark and unluxurious mode of travel. The relay field wraps you in cocooning bands of force and shoots you off through one auxiliary space and another, kicking you through any convenient opening in the space-time lattice that presents itself, and while you wait to be delivered to your destination, you drift like a bauble afloat in an infinite sea, helpless, utterly alone, bereft of all power to override the sweep. Your metabolic processes are suspended, but the activity of your consciousness is not, so that your unsleeping mind ticks on and on in the most maddening way and there is nothing you can do to quiet its clamor. It is as though you must scratch your itching nose and your hands are tied behind your back. Eventually—you have no idea whether it has been an hour, a month, a century—you are plunked unceremoniously down into a relay station at the planet of your choice, and there you are. Relay-sweep transport is ever so much more efficient than any system requiring vast vessels to plow the seas of space from world to world; but all the same it is a disquieting and somewhat degrading way to get around.

So now we depart. Mayfly is the first to be captured by the sweep-beam. Perhaps half an hour later Nikomastir disappears, and then, almost immediately after, Velimyle. My own turn does not arrive for many long hours, which leaves me fidgeting gloomily in that golden meadow, wondering when, if ever, I will be taken, and whether some disjunction in our routes will separate me forever from my three companions. There is that risk—not so much that we would fail to arrive on Sidri Akarak at all, but that we might get there many years apart. I find that a melancholy thought indeed. More than that: It is terrifying.

But finally the dazzling radiance of the sweep aura engulfs me and hurls me out into the Great Dark, and off I go, moving freely across hundreds of light-years with nothing but an invisible sphere of force to protect me against the phantoms of the auxiliary spaces through which I fall.

I hang in total stasis in a realm of utter blackness for what feels like a thousand centuries, an infinity of empty space at my elbow, as I go my zigzag way through the wormholes of the adjacent continua.

Within that terrible passivity my hyperactive mind ponders, as it all too often does, the deep questions of life—issues of honor, duty, justice, responsibility, the meaning of existence, subjects about which I have managed to learn nothing at all, basically, either in this life or the four that preceded it. I arrive at many profound conclusions during the course of my journey, but they fly away from me as fast as I construct them.

I begin to think the trip will never end, that I will be one of those few unfortunate travelers, the one out of a billion who is caught in some shunt malfunction and is left to dangle in the middle of nowhere for all eternity, or at least for the ten or twenty thousand real-time years it will take for his metabolically suspended body to die. Has this actually ever happened to anyone? There are only rumors, unfounded reports. But there comes a time in every sweep-jump when I am convinced that it has happened to me.

Then I see a glare of crimson and violet and azure and green, and my mask-sister Mayfly's voice purrs in my ear, saying, "Welcome to Sidri Akarak, darling, welcome, welcome, welcome!"

Nikomastir stands beside her. A moment later Velimyle materializes in a haze of color. The four of us have made a nearly simultaneous arrival, across who knows how many hundreds of light-years. We definitely do lead charmed lives, we four.

EVERYONE KNOWS about Sidri Akarak. The place was settled at least a thousand years ago, and yet it still has the feel of a frontier world. Only the main streets of the half-dozen big cities are paved; all the rest are mere blue dirt that turn into rivers of mud during the rainy season. The houses are ramshackle, slovenly things, lopsided and drafty, arrayed in higgledy-piggledy fashion as though they had been set down at random by their builders without any regard for logic or order. After all this time the planet is mostly jungle, a jungle that doesn't merely encroach on the settlements but comes right up into them. Wild animals of the most repellent sorts are permitted to

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the Great Dark.**



rampage everywhere, wandering about as they please.

The Akrakikans simply don't care. They pretend the animals—monstrous, appalling—aren't there. The people of Sidri Akarak are a soulless, bloodless bunch in the main, altogether indifferent to such things as comfort and beauty and proper sanitation. Primitive squalor is what they prefer, and if you don't care for it, well, you're quite free to visit some other world.

"Why, exactly, did we come here?" I ask.

It is a rhetorical question. I know perfectly well why: Because Nikomastir, clueless about our next destination, had opened a void that Mayfly had mischievously filled with one of the most unappealing suggestions possible, just to see what Nikomastir would do with it, and Nikomastir had as usual given the matter about a thousandth of a second of careful consideration before blithely leaping headlong into the abyss, thereby taking the rest of us with him, as he has done so often before.

But Nikomastir has already rearranged the facts in what passes for his mind.

"I absolutely had to come here," he says. "It's a place I've always felt the need to see. My daddy was born on Sidri Akarak, you know. This is my ancestral world."

We know better than to challenge Nikomastir when he says things like that. What sense is there in arguing with him? He'll only defend himself by topping one whopper with another twice as wild, building such a towering edifice of spur-of-the-moment fantasy that he'll end up claiming to be the great-grandson of the Fourteenth Emperor, or perhaps the reincarnation of Julius Caesar.

Velimyle whispers at my side, "We'll just stay here two or three days and then we'll move along."

I nod. We all indulge Nikomastir in his whims, but only up to a point.

The sky of Sidri Akarak is a sort of dirty brown, broken by greasy, sullen green clouds. The sunlight is greenish too, pallid, tinged with undertones of dull gray. There is a sweet, overripe, mildly sickening flavor to the warm, clinging air, and its humidity is so intense that it is difficult to distinguish it from light rain. We have landed within some city, apparently—in a grassy open space that anywhere else might have been called a park, but which here seems merely to be a patch of land no one had bothered to use for anything, vaguely square and a couple of hundred meters across. To our left is an irregular row of bedraggled two-story wooden shacks; on our right is a dense clump of ungainly, asymmetrical trees; before and behind us are ragged aggregations of unpainted buildings and scruffy, unattractive shrubbery.

"Look," says Mayfly, pointing, and we have our first encounter with the famous wildlife of Sidri Akarak.

An ugly creature comes bounding toward us out of the trees: a bulky, round-bodied thing, dark and furry, that rises to a disconcerting height atop two scrawny, hairless legs covered with bright yellow scales. Its face is something out of your worst dreams, bulging fiery eyes the size of saucers and dangling red wattles and jutting black fangs, and it is moving very quickly in

our direction, howling ferociously.

We have weapons, of course. But it swiftly becomes apparent that the thing has no interest in us, that in fact it is fleeing an even more ghastly thing, a long bristle-covered, many-legged monster built close to the ground, from whose spherical head emerge three long hornlike projections that branch and branch again, terminating in scores of writhing tendrils that are surely equipped with venomous stingers. First one vile creature and then the other runs past us without seeming to notice us, and they lose themselves in the shrubbery beyond. We can hear wild shrieking and hissing in there, and the sound of cracking branches.

Nikomastir is smiling benignly. All this must be delightful to him. Mayfly too looks entranced. Even Velimyle, who is closest to me in temperament, almost normal in her desires and amusements, claps her hands together in fascination. I alone seem to be troubled by the sight of such creatures running about unhindered on what is supposedly a civilized world.

But it is ever thus in our travels: I am fated always to stand a little to one side as I follow these three around the universe. Yet am I linked irrevocably to them all the same.

Mayfly was my lover once, two lives back. That was before we took the mask together. Now, of course, it would be unthinkable for anything carnal to happen between us, though I still cherish cheerful memories of her pixy breasts in my hands, her slim, sleek thighs about my hips. Even if we have forsworn the sexual part of our friendship, the rest is deeper

than ever, and in truth we are still profoundly a couple, Mayfly and I, despite the rich and rewarding relationship I maintain with Velimyle and the frothy, sportive one Mayfly has built with Nikomastir. Above and beyond all that, there is also the bond that links us all. The lines of attraction go this way and that. We are inseparables. They are my world; I am a citizen only of our little group. Wherever we go, we go together. Even unto Sidri Akarak.

IN A LITTLE WHILE, two immigration officers show up to check us out. Sidri Akarak is an Imperium world, and therefore the local immigration scanners have been automatically alerted to our arrival.

They come riding up in a sputtering little snub-nosed vehicle, a man and a woman in baggy brown uniforms, and begin asking us questions. Nikomastir does most of the answering. His charm is irresistible even to an Akrakikan.

The questioning, brusque and hard-edged, is done in Imperial, but from time to time the immigration officers exchange comments with each other in their own dialect, which sounds like static. The woman is swarthy and squat and flat-faced and the man is even less lovely, and they are not at all obliging; they seem to regard the arrival of tourists on their planet simply as an irritating intrusion. The discussion goes on and on—do we plan to remain here long, are we financially solvent, do we intend to engage in political activity in the course of our stay? Nikomastir meets every query with glib, easy reassurances. During our



**Off I go, across
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interrogation a slimy rain begins to fall, oily pink stuff that coats us like grease, and a massive, many-humped, blue-green beast that looks like an ambulatory hill with purple eyes appears and goes lolloping thunderously past us with utter unconcern for our presence, leaving an odor of decay and corruption in its wake. After a time I stop listening to the discussion. But finally they flash bright lights in our faces—passports are validated retinally on Sidri Akarak—and Nikomastir announces that we have been granted six-month visas. Lodgings are available three streets away, they tell us.

The place they have sent us to turns out to be a dismal, rickety hovel, and our innkeeper is no more friendly than the immigration officials, but we are grudgingly allowed to rent the entire upper floor. The rooms I am to share with Velimyle face the rear garden, a patch of uncouth, tangled wilderness where some slow-moving shaggy monster is sluggishly browsing about, nibbling on the shrubbery. It lifts its head in my direction and gives me a cold glare, as though to warn me away from the plants on which it's feeding. I signal it that it has nothing to worry about and turn away from the window. As I unpack, I see a procession of glassy-shelled snaillike things with huge bulbous red eyes crawling diagonally across the bedroom wall. They, too, stare back at me. They seem almost to be smirking at me.

But Nikomastir and Mayfly claim to be delighted to be here, and Velimyle seems to have no complaints. I feel outnumbered by them. Velimyle announces that she would like to do a painting of Nikomastir in the hotel garden. She only paints when she's in a buoyant mood. Buoyant, here? They run off together downstairs, hand in hand like happy children. I watch from above as Velimyle sets up her easel outside and goes about the task of priming the psychosensitive surface of her canvas. She and Nikomastir are as untroubled as any Akarakikan by the shambling shaggy thing that grazes noisily nearby. How quickly they have acclimated.

"Are you very miserable here, darling?" Mayfly asks, running her fingertips lightly along my cheeks.

I give her a stoic smile. "I'll be all right. We'll find things to amuse us, I'm sure. It's all for the best that Nikomastir brought us to this place."

"You don't mean that, do you? Not really."

"Not really, no."

Yet in some sense I do. I often tell myself that it's important not to live as though life is just a perpetual holiday for us, even though in fact it is. It would be too easy to lose ourselves, if we aren't careful, in the nightmare that is perfection.

This is an era when all things are possible. We have godlike existences. We have every imaginable comfort close at hand. Beauty and long life are ours for the asking; we are spared the whole dreary business of sagging flesh and spreading waistlines and blurry eyesight and graying hair and hardening arteries that afflicted our remote ancestors. And all the incredible richness of the galaxy lies open to us: Key in your coordinates, snap your fingers, off you go, any world you choose to visit instantly available.

Never in the history of the universe has any species lived such a life as ours.

I fear the terrible ease of this existence. I think sometimes that we'll eventually be asked to pay a great price for it. That thought engulfs me in secret terror.

Mayfly, who knows me almost as well as I know myself, says, "Think of it this way, love. There's something to be learned even from ugliness. Isn't it true that what we're trying to get out of all this travel is experience that has meaning? If that's what we want, we can't just limit ourselves to the beautiful places. And maybe a horrid place like Sidri Akarak has something important to teach us."

Yes. She's right. Is she aware that she's voicing my own most private thoughts, or is she just being playful? Perhaps it's all self-delusion, but I do indeed seek for meaning as we travel, or at least think that I do. These furtive broodings in which I indulge inside the hidden places of my soul are, so it seems to me, the thing that sets me apart from Nikomastir and Mayfly and Velimyle, who take life as it comes and ask no questions.

Velimyle and Nikomastir return from the garden a little while later. She puts the rolled canvas away without showing it to me. She has an uncharacteristically somber expression on her face, and even giddy Nikomastir seems troubled. Plainly something has gone awry.

I know better than to ask for details.

We eat at our hotel that night. The surly innkeeper slams the dishes down before us almost angrily: a thin, greenish gruel, some sort of stewed shredded meat, a mess of over-

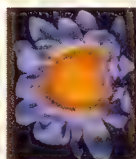
cooked vegetables. The meat tastes like cooked twine, and the vegetables have a dank, swampy flavor. I pretend we are back on Iri-arte, where food is the highest art and every meal is a symphony. I pretend we have returned to Nabomba Zom, to that wondrous palatial hotel by the shore of the scarlet sea, the waters of which at dawn would reverberate as if struck by a hammer as the first blue rays of morning fell upon it.

But no, no, we are on Sidri Akarak. I lie sleepless through the night with Velimyle breathing gently beside me, listening to the fierce honkings and roarings and screechings of the wild beasts that roam the darkness beyond our windows. Now and again the sounds of the lovemaking of Mayfly and Nikomastir come through the thin walls that separate our bedroom from theirs, giggles and gasps and long, indrawn sighs of pleasure.

In the morning we go out exploring.

This city, we have learned, is called Periandros Andifang. It has a population of just under one hundred thousand, with not a single building of the slightest architectural distinction and a year-round climate of clamminess and drizzle. The plant life is, generally speaking, strikingly unsightly—a preponderance of gray leaves, black flowers—and the air is full of clouds of little stinging midges with malevolent purple beaks, and of course one has to deal with the fauna, too, the fiend's gallery of grisly monstrosities, seemingly no two alike, that greet you at every turn: huge beasts with beady eyes and slavering fangs and clacking claws, things with pockmarked, pustulant skins or writhing,

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furry tentacles or clutching, many-jointed arms. Almost always they appear without warning, galloping out of some clump of trees uttering banshee shrieks or ground-shaking roars. I begin to understand now the tales of unwary travelers who have total mental breakdowns within an hour of their arrival on Sidri Akarak.

It quickly becomes clear to us, though, that none of these horrendous creatures has any interest in attacking us. The only real risk we run is that of getting trampled as they go charging past. Very likely it is the case that they find human flesh unpalatable, or indigestible, or downright poisonous. But encountering them is an unnerving business, and we encounter them again and again and again.

Nikomastir finds it all fascinating. Painstakingly he searches out the ill-favored, the misshapen, the feculent, the repulsive—not that they are hard to find. He drifts ecstatically from one eyesore of a building to the next, taking an infinite number of pictures. He adores the plants' sooty, foul-smelling blossoms and sticky, blighted-looking leaves. The rampaging animals give him even greater pleasure; whenever some particularly immense or especially abhorrent-looking loathsomeness happens to cross our path, he cries out in boyish glee.

This starts to be very irritating. His callow idiocy is making me feel old.

"Remember, sweet, he's not even seventy yet," Mayfly reminds me, seeing my brows furrowing. "Surely you were like that yourself, once upon a time."

"Was I? I'd like to think that isn't so."

"And in any case," says Velimyle, "can't you manage to find that enthusiasm of his charming?"

No. I can't. Perhaps it's getting to be time for my next rebirth, I think. Growing old, for us, isn't a matter so much of bodily decay—that is fended off by efficient processes of automatic bioenergetic correction—as of increasing inward rigidity, a creakiness of the soul, a corrugation of the psyche, a stiffening of the spiritual synapses. One starts to feel sour and petty and crabbed. Life loses its joy and its juice. By then you begin to become aware that it is time to clamber once more into the crystal tank where an intricate spiderweb of machinery will enfold you like a loving mother, and slip off into sweet oblivion for a while, and awaken to find yourself young again and ready to start all over. Which you can do over and over again, until eventually you arrive at the annoying point, after the eleventh or twelfth rebirth, where the buildup of solar poisons in your system has at last become ineradicable under any circumstances, and that is the end of you, alas. Even gods have to die eventually, it would seem.

Nikomastir is a young god, and I am, evidently, an aging one. I try to make allowances for that. But I find myself fervently hoping, all the same, that he will tire of this awful place very soon and allow us to go onward to some happier world.

HE DOES NOT tire of it, though.

He loves it. He is in the grip of what some ancient poet once called the fascination of the abomination. He has gone up and

down every street of the city, peering at this building and that one in unstinting admiration of their imperfections. For several days running, he makes it clear that he is searching for some building in particular, and then he finds it: a rambling old ruin of great size and formidable ugliness at the very edge of town, standing apart from everything else in a sort of private park.

"Here it is!" he cries. "The ancestral mansion! The house where my father was born!"

So Nikomastir still clings to the claim that he is of Akarakikan descent. There is no way this can be true; the natives of this world are a chilly, bloodless folk with mean, pinched, hard souls, if they have souls at all and not just some clicking, chattering robotic mechanisms inside their skulls. Indeed, I have known robots with personalities far more appealing than anyone we

have met thus far on Sidri Akarak. Nikomastir, bless him, is nothing at all like that. He may be silly and frivolous and empty-headed, but he also is sweet-natured and lively and amiable and vivacious, terms that have never yet been applied to any citizen of Sidri Akarak, and never will be.

Velimyle has tried to paint him again. Again the attempt was a failure. This time she is so distressed that I dare to breach the wall of privacy behind which she keeps her art and ask her what the difficulty is.

"Look," she says.

She unrolls the second canvas. Against the familiar swirling colors of a typical Velimyle background I see the slender, angular form of Nikomastir, imprinted there by the force of Velimyle's mental rapport with the psychosen-

sitive fabric. But the features are all wrong. Nikomastir's perpetual easy smile has given way to a dreadful, scowling grimace. His lip curls backward menacingly; his teeth are the teeth of some predatory beast. And his eyes—oh, Velimyle, those harsh, glaring eyes! Where is his cheerful sparkle? These eyes are hard, narrow, fierce, and above all else sad. The Nikomastir of Velimyle's painting stares out at the universe with tragic intensity. They are the eyes of a god, perhaps, but of a dying god, one who knows he must give up his life for the redemption of his race.

"The first one was almost as bad," Velimyle says. "Why is this happening? This isn't Nikomastir at all. I've never had something like this happen."

"Has he seen either of the paintings?"

"I wouldn't let him. All I told him was that they didn't come out right, that they would depress him if I showed them to him. And of course he didn't want to see them after that."

"Something about this planet must be shading your perceptions," I say. "Burn this, Velimyle. And the other one, too. And forget about painting him until we've left here."

Nikomastir wants to have a look inside the crumbling, lurching pile that he says is his family's ancestral home. But the place, ruinous though it is, happens to be occupied by Akarakikans, a whole swarm of them, and when he knocks at the front door and grandly introduces himself to the majordomo of the house as Count Nikomastir of Sembiran, who has come here on a sentimental journey to his former paternal estate, the



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door is closed in his face without a word. "How impolite," Nikomastir says, not seeming very surprised. "But don't worry: I'll find a way of getting in."

That project gets tabled, too. Over the next few days he leads us farther and farther afield, well out into the uninhabited countryside beyond the boundaries of Periandros Andifang. The land out here is swampy and uningratiating, and of course there are the animals to contend with, and the insects, and the humidity. I can tell that Mayfly and Velimyle are growing a little weary of Nikomastir's exuberance, but they both are as tolerant of his whims as ever and follow him loyally through these soggy realms. As do I—partly, I suppose, because we agreed long ago that we would journey everywhere as a single unit, and partly because I have been stung, evidently, by various hints of Mayfly's and Velimyle's that my recent crochetedness could mean I might be getting ready for my next rebirth.

Then he turns his attention once more to the old house that he imagines once belonged to his family. "My father once told me that there's a pool of fire behind it, a phosphorescent lake. He used to swim in it when he was a boy, and he'd come up dripping with cool flame. I'm going to take a swim in it too, and then we can head off to the next planet. Whose turn is it to pick our next planet, anyway?"

"Mine," I say quickly. I have Marajo in mind—the sparkling sands, the City of Seven Pyramids. "If there's a lake behind that house, Nikomastir, I advise you very earnestly to stay away from it. The people who live there don't seem to look favorably on trespassers. Besides, can't you imagine the kind of nastinesses that would live in a lake on this world?"

"My father went swimming in that one," Nikomastir replies, and gives me a defiant glare. "It's perfectly safe, I assure you."

I doubt, of course, that any such lake exists. If it's there, though, I hope he isn't fool enough to go swimming in it. My affection for the boy is real; I don't want him to come to harm.

But I let the matter drop. I've already said too much. The surest way to prod him into trouble, I know, is to oppose him in one of his capricious fancies. My hope is that Nikomastir's attention will be diverted elsewhere in the next day or two and all thought of that dismal house, and of the fiery lake that may or may not be behind it, will fly out of his mind.

It's generally a good idea, when visiting a world you know very little about, to keep out of places of unknown chemical properties. When we toured Megalo Castro, we stood at the edge of a cliff looking down into the famous living sea, that pink custardy mass that is in fact a single living organism of gigantic size, spreading across thousands of kilometers of that world. But it did not occur to us to take a swim in that sea, for we understood that in a matter of hours it would dissolve and digest us if we did.

And when we were on Xamur we went to see the Idradin crater, as everyone who goes to Xamur does. Xamur is the most perfect of worlds, flawless and serene, a paradise, air like perfume and water like wine, every tree in the ideal place, every brook, every hill. It has only one blemish—the Idradin, a huge

round pit that reaches deep into the planet's primordial heart. It is a hideous place, that crater. Concentric rings of jagged cooled lava surround it, black and eroded and bleak. Stinking gases rise out of the depths, and yellow clouds of sulfuric miasma belch forth, and wild red shafts of roaring flame, and you peer down from the edge into a roiling den of hot, surging magma. Everyone who goes to Xamur must visit the Idradin, for if you did not see perfect Xamur's one terrible flaw, you could never be happy on any other world. And so we stared into it from above, and shivered with the horror we were expected to feel; but we were never at all tempted to clamber down the crater's sides and dip our toes into that realm of fire below.

It seems unlikely to me that Nikomastir will do anything so stupid here. But I have to be careful not to prod him in the wrong direction. I don't mention the lake to him again.

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OUR EXPLORATION of Sidri Akarak proceeds. We visit new swamps, new groves of fetid-smelling, malproportioned trees, new neighborhoods of misshapen and graceless buildings. One drizzly, disheartening day succeeds another, and finally I am unable to bear the sight of that brown sky and greenish sun any longer. Though it is a violation of our agreement, I stay behind at the hotel one morning and let the other three go off without me.

It is a quiet time. I spend the hours reflecting on our travels of years past, all the many worlds we have seen. Icy Mulano of the two suns, one yellow, one bloody red, and billions of ghostly electric life-forms glimmering about you in the frigid air. Estrilidis, where the cats have two tails and the insects have eyes like blue diamonds. Zimbalou, the sunless nomad world, where the cities are buried deep below the frozen surface. Kalimaka, Haj Qaldun, Vietoris, Nabomba Zom—

So many places, so many sights. A lifetime of wonderful experiences; and yet what, I ask myself, has it all meant? How has it shaped me? What have I learned?

I have no answers, only to say that we will continue to go onward, ever onward. It is our life. It is what we do. We are travelers by choice, but also by nature, by destiny.

I am still lost in reverie when I hear Velimyle's voice outside my window, calling to me, telling me that I must come quickly. "Nikomastir—" she cries. "Nikomastir!"

"What about him?"

But she can only gesture and wave. Her eyes are wild. We run together through the muddy streets, paying no heed to the bulky and grotesque Akarakikan monstrosities that occasionally intersect our path. I realize after a time that Velimyle is leading me toward the tumbledown house at the edge of town that Nikomastir has claimed as his family's former home. A narrow, grassy path leads around one side of it to the rear; and there, to my amazement, I see the phosphorescent lake of Nikomastir's fantasies, with Mayfly beside it, leaping up and down in agitation that verges on frenzy.

She points toward the water. "Out there—there—" On this

ugly world, even a phosphorescent lake can somehow manage to be an unlovely sight. I saw one once on Darma Barma that flashed like heavenly fire in rippling waves of cobalt and amethyst, magenta and gold, aquamarine and emerald and jade. But from this lake emanates the most unradiant of radiances, a dull, prosaic, sickly gleam, dark-toned and dispiriting, except in one place off toward the farther shore, where a disturbance of some sort is setting up whirlpools of glinting metallic effects, swirls of eye-jabbing bright sparkles, as though handfuls of iron filings are being thrown through a magnetic field.

The disturbance is Nikomastir. He—his body, rather—is tossing and heaving at the lake's surface, and all about him the denizens of the lake can be seen, narrow scaly jutting heads popping up by the dozens, hinged jaws snapping, sharp teeth closing on flesh. A widening pool of blood surrounds him. They, whatever they are, are ripping him to shreds.

"We have to get him out of there," Mayfly says, her voice congested with horror and fear.

"How?" I ask.

"I told him not to do it," says trembling Velimyle. "I told him, I told him, I told him. But he plunged right in, and when he was halfway across they began to break the surface, and then—then he began screaming, and—"

Mayfly plucks urgently at my sleeve. "What can we do? How can we rescue him?"

"He's beyond rescuing," I tell her hollowly.

"But if we can get his body back," she says, "there'll be a way to revive him, won't there? I know there is. Scientists can do anything nowadays." Velimyle, more tentatively, agrees. Some kind of scientific miracle, Nikomastir gathered up and repaired somehow by the regeneration of tissue—

But tissue is all that's left of him now, frayed sorry scraps, and the creatures of the lake, frantic now with blood lust, are devouring even those in furious haste.

They want me to tell them that Nikomastir isn't really dead. But he is: really, really, really dead. Dead forever. What has been played out on this shore today was not a game. There is nothing that can be saved, no way to regenerate. I have never seen the death of a human being before. It is a dizzying thing to contemplate: the finality, the utterness. My mind is whirling; I have to fight back convulsions of shock and horror.

"Couldn't you have stopped him?" I ask angrily, when I am able to speak again.

"But he wanted so badly to do it," Mayfly replies. "We couldn't have stopped him, you know. Not even if we—"

She halts in mid-sentence.

"Not even if you had wanted to?" I say. "Is that it?" Neither of them can meet my furious gaze. "But you didn't want to, did you? You thought it would be fun to see Nikomastir swim across the phosphorescent lake. Fun. Am I right? Yes. I know I am. What could you have been thinking, Mayfly? Velimyle?"

There is no sign of Nikomastir at the surface any longer. The lake is growing still again. Its phosphorescence has subsided to a somber, tarnished glow.

For a long time, none of us is capable of moving. Silent, pale, stunned, we stand with bowed heads by the shore of that frightful lake, scarcely even able to breathe.

We are in the presence of incontrovertible and permanent

death, which to us is a novelty far greater even than the living sea of Megalo Kastro or the blue dawn of Nabomba Zom, and the immense fact of it holds us rooted to the spot. Was this truly Nikomastir's ancestral world? Was his father actually born in that great old falling-down house, and did he really once swim in this deadly lake? And if none of that was so, how did Nikomastir know the lake was there? We will never be able to answer those questions. Whatever we do not know about Nikomastir, that we have not already learned, we will never come to discover now. That is the meaning of death: the finality of it, the severing of communication, the awful unanswerable power of the uncompromising curtain that descends like a wall of steel. We did not come to Sidri Akarak to learn about such things, but that is what we have learned on Sidri Akarak, and we will take it with us wherever we go henceforth, pondering it, examining it.

"Come," I say to Mayfly and Velimyle, after a time. "We need to get away from here."

SO, THEN. Nikomastir was foolish. He was bold. He has had his swim, and now he is dead. And why? Why? For what? What was he seeking on this awful world? What were we? We know what we found, yes, but not what we were looking for. I wonder if we will ever know.

He has lived his only life, has Nikomastir, and he has lost it in the pursuit of idle pleasure. There is a lesson in that, for me, for Velimyle, for Mayfly, for us all. And one day I will, I hope, understand what it is.

All I do know after having lived these hundreds of years is that the universe is very large and we are quite small. We live godlike lives these days, flitting as we do from world to world, but even so we are not gods. We die: some sooner, some later, but we do die. Only gods live forever. Nikomastir hardly lived at all.

So be it. We have learned what we have learned from Nikomastir's death, and now we must move on. We are travelers by nature and destiny, and we will go forward into our lives. Tomorrow we leave for Marajo. The shining sands, the City of Seven Pyramids. Marajo will teach us something, as Xamur once did, and Nabomba Zom, and Galgala. And also Sidri Akarak. Something. Something. Something. ☹



about the author

Robert Silverberg has been writing for AMAZING Stories for more than half a century (see "Fifty Years Together" in issue 596). His stories and novels have won three Hugo Awards and five Nebula Awards, among other honors. For more examples of his work, we recommend you visit the Silverberg section of your local bookstore.

about the illustrator

Known for his "in your face" comic book villains and monsters, Dave DeVries departed form on this one. In Dave's words: "Nikomastir reminded me of 'The Fool' in the tarot card deck who obviously walks toward the edge of a dangerous cliff. Having made some poor choices in life, I identified with him and depicted him heroically gaining wisdom from his mistake that the other three characters are missing.

"Well, either that or he was eel lunch. You decide."



*A pagan plot, or a deeper plan beyond the ken of a simple scribe?
It could be either. It could be both.*

BY KAGE BAKER

THE FOURTH BRANCH

WHEN MY NAME WAS EOGAN, I LIVED IN THE community at Malinmhor, having gladly embraced my vows for the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I thought I had the best of the bargain. No heavier tool to lift than a pen cut from the quill of a gray goose, and the beauty of the red and green and yellow and black inks was a pleasure for my eyes, and how smooth were the sheets of fine white calfskin waiting for me! And how sweet to refresh myself with the Gospel that I copied, there in the little scriptorium, when I could still believe in it!

What a world of grace fell away from me when that pagan man came among us, three weeks before Beltane in the five hundred and seventh year since Christ's birth.

But no blame to him, poor man; God knows he had the worst of it. The truth is, the trouble started well beforehand, but I knew nothing of it, happy and alone as I worked. So blinded was I with the beauty I made by day that I never noticed the frightened faces when I joined my brothers and sisters for supper in the refectory of evenings.

And we didn't speak aloud much—it was a monastery, after all—and I wouldn't have believed in the trouble, had anyone explained it to me. If our community lay in the shadow of the high bare hill Dun Govaun, what harm in that? No rational Christian had anything to fear from a mound of dead stone. If pagans had feared the place in the past, if they'd told stories of babies carried off or folk seduced by small demons—well, they were pagans, weren't they? At the mercy of darkness, as we brothers and sisters in Christ were not. Though I remember being awakened by the screams of a brother in his nightmares, I do remember that much now; but it signified nothing to me at the time.

ILLUSTRATION BY GREG COUCH





Well. When the pagan came, it was neither by day nor night but in the long hour between when the light had not faded, and when we neither fasted nor fed but sat at table with our meal not yet begun, and our brother the cook had just brought out the oat-kettle, and Liath our Abbess was neither silent nor speaking, for she had just drawn in her breath to lead the grace. The pagans believe such in-between moments make doorways into the next world, you know.

In that unlucky moment the door opened and the porter led in a young man in very fine clothes, perhaps too large for him.

"This is the guest Christ has sent us, who comes requiring meat and shelter for the night," said the porter, and he withdrew to his duty. The man stood surveying us all with a pleasant face. From the dust on his rich garments, it was plain he'd traveled far, and from the harp he bore, slung in its case on his back, plain his profession of *fili*, of chronicler after the manner of the heathens. I thought he looked too young to have learned so much lore as those people are required to know.

"A blessing on this table," he said, and our Abbess, scenting a pagan, corrected him:

"Christ's blessing on this table, and all here."

"Oh, by all means," he replied mildly and smiled at the Abbess.

He dined, then, with us, and revealed that his name was Lewis, that he was indeed a pagan well trained in his craft of

"Yes, in good truth, we have."

"Would you mind awfully if we switched to Latin for this?" he inquired in that tongue. "It'll go quicker."

"Fair enough," I replied in the same language, and we conversed in Latin after that.

"What about the Finn MacCool stories? Any of those?"

"Well, we did get a couple of songs about him from an old man who stayed here last winter," I told him, noting that my red ink had sat too long and giving it a shake to mix it. "I don't think his memory was very reliable, though."

"Ah! Well, I've got the complete cycle. Sounds like a good place to begin, wouldn't you say?" He grinned and fished a horn plectrum out of a pouch at his belt.

"Let's hear it!" I replied, and poised my pen over the lovely white page. God, how I've missed writing, just the physical act of moving the pen, making the ink flow!

He had hours and hours of material on the Fenians, material I'd never heard before as well as the two stories the old man had given us (and, as I'd suspected, the poor old thing had garbled them badly). I myself was born Christian, and since my parents were zealous converts, they had always frowned on any of us children listening to the old pagan stories. I knew all about Patrick and Moses and Noah, but I could never hear about Cuchulainn or Deirdre until I became a monk. Ironic, isn't it?



THERE'S SO MUCH THAT'S WORTH TRADITIONS, SO MUCH GREAT

relating the old histories, and had come to offer us a bargain: He would tell us all the wonder-tales he carried in his head and songs of the old pagan heroes, in return for food and lodging. Our Abbess looked across at me with the eye of a cat after a mouse, for both she and I collected these tales avidly (though we did not believe them at all).

So the bargain was made, with the understanding that the pagan should observe no pagan rites whilst among us, especially on the old feast day that was three weeks off, but attend Mass daily instead. To which Lewis agreed, readily, without anger. After dining he was shown the bathhouse, and then the guest house, and he took his leave of us for the evening with the urbane manners of a king's son, which we thought he must be.

When it grew light next day he met me in the scriptorium, for the purpose of fulfilling his end of the agreement, and settled himself on a stone seat. He took his harp from its case and frowned to himself as he tuned it. I will record here that Lewis was small-boned, high-browed, with fine, clean-shaven features and fair hair, though it did not curl. His eyes were just the color of the sky in that twilight time in which he had come.

When he had tuned the strings to his satisfaction, he said to me:

"Brother Eogan, tell me first what tales you have collected thus far, from other travelers, so I waste no time in repeating them. Have you *The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*?"

"Yes, in good truth, we have."

"Have you *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*?"

Anyway, Lewis relayed the whole story to me, all about Finn growing up in the forest because evil King Goll had killed his father, so the boy was raised in secret by a pair of druid women, who conjured a wolf-spirit to be his protector. Spellbinding! Lewis was a good storyteller, too: He had a very mobile, expressive face, elegant gestures, and a nice light baritone. My pen just swept across the page.

We didn't even take a break until I got a paralyzing fit of writer's cramp just after the part when Finn calls his father's ghost from the Land of the Blessed, and the old chief gives him advice. I got up and walked back and forth in the narrow stone room, swinging my arms, while Lewis took the opportunity to pour himself a cup of watered mead from the pitcher we'd brought.

"Well!" He sipped and held the cup out to the light. "My goodness, who's your beekeeper? That's great!"

"A former pagan," I admitted. "Nobody else quite gets the formula right, I must confess. You see, that's part of the Abbess's plan here—there's so much that's worth preserving in Eire, so much wisdom, such traditions, so much great literature! If only it wasn't *pagan*, you see. Not that I expect you to agree with me on that point, of course, and no offense intended—"

"No, no." Lewis waved his hand. "Quite all right. I understand perfectly—"

"But these wonderful stories, for example! I think it's absolutely criminal that the druids didn't bother to write any of them down. You must realize that in another generation or two

they'll be completely forgotten, don't you? And though we won't be the poorer for losing our false gods, it really would be too bad to lose Finn."

"My thoughts exactly," Lewis nodded. "That's one of the reasons I'm here, to tell you the truth. I can see the writing on the wall, and while my profession doesn't really encourage me to write on it myself—so to speak—there's nothing to stop me telling everything I know to you Christian fellows who can. In fact..." He set down his harp and leaned forward. "In fact, I have rather a daring proposition for you."

I stopped pacing. "It's not something sinful, I trust."

"Oh! Not at all, at least not by your standards. Look, it's simply this: I'm a bit more than a bard. I have some religious credentials as well, in my religion I mean. I was trained for certain rituals I'll never be able to perform nowadays, with so few of us left."

"But you're so young," I said doubtfully. "I thought most of the *vates* had died off years ago."

"I'm older than I look." Was he evading my gaze there, for just a second? "In any case, my point is this: I'm quite resigned to the druids being dead as last year's mutton, but I feel bad about their more, ah, arcane knowledge being lost. The sciences. The sacred stuff. The holy rituals, the ceremonies, and all that. Now, I couldn't ever tell you Christians certain things, being sworn to secrecy, but if you happened to overhear me talking to myself—

"Finn married?" I grabbed up my pen.

"Not exactly. It was like this..."

SO WE WENT ON LIKE THAT, HE AND I, AND the hours lengthened into days. From sunrise until midday we'd work on the stories of Finn, or the tale of Conchobar's quest for the Four Blind Boys, or other fascinating material, with me copying fast in simple brown ink, leaving margins and capitals to be elaborated on and illuminated later. If the weather was fair and windless we'd move outdoors, where the light was better and Lewis wouldn't have to keep retuning his strings. Sometimes the Abbess would come out, unable to restrain her desire, and read over my shoulder or listen with her eyes closed, to hear about Fergus and the Seal-Woman. But in the afternoons, when she had gone, we'd go inside and work on the *Codex Druidae*, the forbidden book. The actual text took no more than a week or so to rough in; I planned to spend more time on the illumination.

I must say, any reservations I had melted away once I actually wrote down the Sacred Knowledge of my ancestors. No wonder they'd kept it secret! Most of it was utter nonsense. I remember one absurd formula for producing children out of nature, by combining tiny bits of the parents' flesh in a glass dish. Some of their astronomy was fairly good, at least—they knew, like Pythagoras, that the Earth was a sphere—but they had this notion that the

PRESERVING IN EIRE, SO MUCH WISDOM, SUCH LITERATURE! IF ONLY IT WASN'T PAGAN, YOU SEE.

say if we happened to be sitting in the same room at the time—and you happened to write down what you heard, well, it wouldn't be a sin for you, would it?"

"I'm not so sure about that." I sat down to consider it. "Preserving heathen history and legends is one thing. Preserving a false faith—I don't know, Lewis. . . . I seem to remember the Blessed Patrick stating quite clearly that druid books ought to be burned, not preserved!"

He sighed and had another sip of mead. "I know what you're thinking: What if this is some pagan plot to keep the old religion going by making new copies of the famous Lost Lore? I'll tell you what you can do: Once you've written down this *Codex Druidae*, you can bury it in a lead casket ten feet below the floor of this room. I'll swear any oath you like that it'll remain there undisturbed, unseen for a thousand years and more. Gracious, I wouldn't want it found by my coreligionists; can you imagine what they'd do to me if they knew I'd told this stuff to a Christian monk? We've got some pretty severe penalties for sacrilege, let me tell you!"

"It's a strange request. . . ." I tugged at my beard. "Still, I know how I'd feel in your position. Couldn't we finish this cycle of stories about Finn MacCool first?"

"Naturally!" He brightened up, setting down his mead and reaching for the harp. "How's your cramp? Feel up to some white-knuckle iambic pentameter? Let's see, I was just about to come to the part where Finn's woman is stolen by demons of darkness. . . ."

Earth revolves around the Sun! In fact, they thought—but it's just too stupid to waste ink on. I confess I was laughing as I took most of it down. Lewis was a good sport about it, at least; but no wonder he'd abandoned the priestly caste to be a bard!

And in any case, he was a kindly young man, and I couldn't imagine him shutting unfortunate malefactors into wicker cages and burning them alive. Not that he wouldn't have been strong enough; one time he took his turn at serving the evening meal, though as a guest he needn't have, and I saw him hoist the great fish cauldron on his shoulder and bear it from the kitchen as though it weighed nothing. I watched him mend a set of beads for one of the sisters one evening at table, prizing and closing the bronze links with strong clever fingers. And his speech was graceful and witty, making us laugh so much it was as if Christ Himself were there telling jokes.

This happy time lasted until Beltane Eve. On that afternoon, Lewis and I were sitting out of doors, and white thorn blossoms were dropping on the calfskin from the bush above me, so I kept having to brush them away as I took down Lewis's account of the Daughter of the King Under the Waves. Suddenly he stopped; and a second later the birds, who had been singing delightfully, stopped too. "Liath is coming," Lewis announced, raising one eyebrow, "and something's wrong."

When she came into view I saw he was right, for her face was dark with unhappiness. She wasted no time, but came straight to Lewis, and in blunt Gaelic addressed him: "Pagan man, have you any knowledge of the ways of the *sidhe*?"

His mouth hung open a second in surprise. "I have," he admitted.

"Good, for we have need of it. Brother Crimthann has been stolen away from us by the *sidhe* of Dun Govaun, and must be rescued."

If Finn and all his host had suddenly leaped alive from my page, I could not have been more bewildered. Fairy folk? Fairy folk kidnapping one of *us*? But the *sidhe* were mere heathen fables—they didn't exist! And I saw that Lewis was no less amazed, though courteously he asked her to explain.

It seemed that Brother Crimthann, who was one of the younger members of our community, had been troubled lately with bad dreams. In his dreams, the *sidhe* came into the cell where he slept as easily as if they walked through smoke, and bore him away with them to their palace under Dun Govaun. There he suffered torments of fleshly temptation, but by morning woke in his cell again with no sign of the ordeal of his dreams: not even the guilty emission of a young man so tempted. He had sworn that the *sidhe* were not beautiful, either, but pale and small, hairless, silent.

At this I saw Lewis start forward, like a hound catching a scent. "Now that is a strange thing, truly," he told the Abbess.

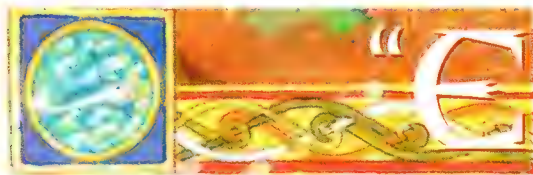
"Strange, but not so strange as this: Brother Crimthann did not come to prayers this morning, nor later, nor was he to be

daresay Brother Crimthann will too, when he's past thirty and not quite so easily tempted by the flesh."

"Cheer up! Baldness looks good on some men. You think that's all it is, then, with Brother Crimthann? He's been sneaking out at night to visit a girl?" Lewis leaped nimbly up on a rock and peered ahead, shading his eyes with his hand. "Ah! Is that the famous Dun Govaun?"

"That's it." I regarded it sourly. "The supposed hall of the fairies. Absolutely ridiculous! It's a completely smooth and solid hill. Not even a rabbit hole on it anywhere. As for Brother Crimthann, he's simply run away, if you ask me. That's the problem with these boys who get all inflamed by the idea of monastic life before they've had a chance to see what sleeping with a woman's like." I bent to untangle a branch of gorse from the leg of my treads. "Chastity seems like such a wonderful idea until the first time someone actually tempts them, and then they go all to pieces. Then it's hysteria, night sweats, and all Satan's fault."

"Not one of the better innovations of Christianity, if you'll pardon my saying so," Lewis remarked as we hurried on. "Well, but perhaps we'll find a clue on Dun Govaun. I'm eager to see if anything's up there. There are, er . . . certain stories amongst my people, of creatures like the ones Brother Crimthann described. The pale fellows. We've never been able to verify anything, of course. So what do you think Dun Govaun is? Not a natural



“E EOGAN,” SAID LEWIS, WITH A
“THERE ARE PEOPLE COMING

found in his cell. But Brother Aidan's hut adjoins his, and Brother Aidan swears that in the third hour of the night the moon shone into his cell, bright enough to flood between the stone chinks; and as you are a pagan and learned in these things I need not tell you that there was no moon last night." The Abbess looked at him grimly. "Now, this is a pagan matter. The Blessed Patrick gave us prayers against the *sidhe*, but I never read anywhere that fairy women carried him away from his holy bed. Can you go to them, then, and win our brother back with that fine pagan talk of yours? Bring him alive out of Dun Govaun, and Christ will bless you for it, druid though you are."

"I will," said Lewis, "and gladly, good Mother! Only tell me where to find Dun Govaun, and I'll go there straight."

"Brother Eogan knows," she told him, and gave me a Look of Order. "Eogan, show him the way."

WELL, WE SET OUT FROM THE MONASTERY in no small excitement. I was still incredulous at being sent off to find fairies, of all things, and Lewis was excited and gleeful as a child guessing what a present might be.

"This is really marvelous!" he told me as we pushed our way through the heather. "Tell me, Eogan, have you ever noticed this sort of thing going on before? Strange lights in the sky, unusual marking in the fields, cattle inexplicably slaughtered in grotesque ways? Any nocturnal goings-on in your cell?"

"Certainly not," I replied stiffly. "I sleep soundly at night, at least since I stopped having to shave my tonsure any more. I

hill, at any rate."

"Oh, nothing more than the burial mound of some heathen king," I said dismissively; but I glanced upward, for by then we were actually walking up the side of the great hill, and I felt my opinion curdle in my heart. Perhaps a *giant* heathen king, then. But surely nothing more!

"There's a place in Britain—" began Lewis, and then he stopped still in his tracks. He seemed to be listening intently to something; his face lit up. He began to laugh.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said, in rather poor taste under the circumstances, I thought. "They're here, Eogan! There are actually living things inside this hill!"

"How do you know?" I was unable to see what should amuse him so.

"Let's say it's druidical wisdom," he replied, chuckling, and began to pace rapidly along the side of the hill. "Yes—yes—there should be a suitably concealed opening, and I'll bet it's just about here—"

"What in Christ's name are you babbling about?" I demanded, running after him until he suddenly vanished before my astounded eyes. I froze, staring at empty grass and windy sky. To my horror, his bright voice went right on:

"Yes, here it is, no doubt about it. Look at that! Eogan? What's the matter? Oh." His head appeared in midair, a vision no less terrifying. He must have seen how frightened I was, for in a soothing voice he said:

"Don't be afraid. This is only a conjurer's trick. There's magic

in your Bible, isn't there? Moses and Aaron working spells against Pharaoh's magicians? This is no more than that."

"But—" I said, and that was when I felt my faith first shifting under me. All this while I had believed that Christ's coming had scoured sorcery out of the world, as the sunrise dispels darkness; and though the old stories might be good to tell and listen to, and the days of the heroes sentimentally longed after, no such wonders existed anymore, if indeed they ever had.

Yet my belief had been imperfect, hadn't it? For the old prophets did work magic, Christ himself had done so, and where in Scripture did it say that we lived in an orderly and rational world?

Lewis extended a disembodied hand, in a gesture meant to calm me. "Come around here, and I'll show you."

Christ forgive me, I went to see. As I approached, the rest of him appeared, whole and sound, and I saw the wavering stripes of shadow he was pointing out so proudly. They were like the blurs that used to dance before my eyes when I'd worked too late by one candle. "Now, watch this," he told me, and closed his eyes and seemed to concentrate. I heard a humming sound and a snap. The mouth of a cave yawned before us, black, dark, and deep. I made the Sign of the Cross against all evil.

"What did you do?"

"I just—broke the spell. In a manner of speaking. I'll bet

certainly stupid." I sat up painfully, feeling as though I'd been beaten. We lay in half darkness, in an angle of corridor lined by panes of milk-white glass that glowed softly. Behind us, set into the floor, was a simple metal grating.

"Eogan," said Lewis, with a queer, frightened tone in his voice. "Eogan, there are people coming for us, and I'm afraid I have a problem."

"What is that?" How groggy I sounded.

"I seem to be paralyzed."

I felt sick. "Your neck's broken, then. I'm sorry, man."

"No, it can't break, but—" He paused a moment and then spoke rapidly. "Eogan, I'd like to make a confession. Will you hear it? Will you be my *anmchara*?"

"But you're a pagan!"

"I'll convert. Will you? If I ask you in Christ's name?" His voice was desperate.

And of course I must say yes, and so I was bound to his secret. I leaned close in the darkness to hear Lewis as he drew a deep breath and confessed:

"You see . . . I'm afraid I'm rather more of a pagan than you thought. In fact, I'm not strictly what you'd call a human being."

"What are you, then?" I sat back to stare at him. His eyes were dark with terror, and he was certainly sweating like a mortal man.

"The word *cyborg* won't mean anything to you. You'd call me a

QUEER, FRIGHTENED TONE IN HIS VOICE. FOR US, AND I'M AFRAID I HAVE A PROBLEM."

Brother Crimthann's in there." Lewis's smile faded as he considered the fact he'd revealed to me. "Good Lord, a real abduction. What should we do now, do you suppose?"

"You—you said you'd rescue him!" I sputtered.

"I did, didn't I?" He looked unhappy. "Well. You wait here, then. I'll be back as soon as I can." To my astonishment he turned without the least hesitation and proceeded down into the darkness, and I realized he had no weapon with him larger than a penknife. I watched his back dwindling into the shadows for a moment before I ran after him, calling on the power of Christ to shield me.

"Oh—" He half turned as I caught hold of his cloak. "That's all right, you don't have to come. Really, you'll be safer out there. I can see in the dark—had I mentioned that?"

"No," I replied, groping after him. Strange smells were coming from the darkness, but I didn't want to be thought a coward; and wasn't the power of Christ greater than anything that might be down there? It must be, mustn't it? "I'll bear you company."

"Well, that's awfully thoughtful of you. Now, be careful, Eogan; I don't know if you can feel it or not, but we're in some kind of stone passageway. It's getting narrower, and there's a kind of threshold we're about to step across. Here. Step up with me now—"

Then it was as though lightning had come down from Heaven into that black place, and I was struck and thrown like a spark from a smith's anvil.

Hours and hours later I heard Lewis saying, "Well, that was

homunculus, I suppose, grown from a mortal infant but changed with clever machinery. The masters who created me live nearly two thousand years in the future, Eogan. I work for them here in the past, finding things they want and hiding them in places that won't be disturbed until their own era. I've been functioning for four centuries now." He swallowed hard and seemed to get his panic under control. "They made me immortal and indestructible; at least they thought so. They know everything—well, not quite everything, or I wouldn't be lying here now, would I? My God, I can't die! Can I?" He gave a laugh that caught on a sob. I reached for his hand and squeezed it. It felt mortal.

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about," I told him, trying even then to hold tight to my orderly, rational world. "But I've seen men fall and lose movement down one side of themselves, or lose the power of speech. I think that's happened to you, Lewis. I'm sorry."

"Actually I suppose it *is* something like that. When we stepped on that grid—obviously it was a trap, and I suspect it was designed for my kind—it damaged me. Only my head is working, and I think that's because of an emergency backup system. I don't know how much longer before that system breaks down too. I can't seem to reset myself! Listen, Eogan! Will you swear to me to fulfill a duty? As my confessor, Eogan!"

"Of course," I assured him. As his *anmchara* I had that obligation, though I'd barely understood what he'd said. I understand well enough now, to my grief.

"Go back now!" Lewis begged me. "Go back and seal the *Codex Druidae* in lead, and bury it ten feet below the floor of your scriptorium! You'll find the lead casket with my things in the guest house. Please, Eogan!"

"Why is this so important?" I felt his forehead. He wasn't feverish; cold, in fact. He had to be raving, though.

"Because it'll be worth an awful lot of money to the Neo-Wiccans when it's dug up in 2350!" he replied.

I had not the slightest idea what he meant by that at all, nor was I ever to get him to explain further, for his eyes went wide suddenly and he gasped. "Good God! Look at that!"

This last was not a timely prayer, but a reaction to the creatures who were suddenly there with us in that dark hall, things like horrible children. Small, with skin pale as ashes, and tiny, weak faces set low on big heads. They were naked, save for goggles of black glass worn over eyes that were probably as weak as the rest of them. No genitals at all. I wanted to yell with revulsion at the sight of them; but a voice like the devil spoke within my ear, wheedling, coaxing, imploring.

Please, it begged me, please! Rise and bring the mechanism with you. Please go with us. We're going somewhere nice. You'll want to come. And though I detested the little voice before and after I heard it, while it twittered away at me I could no more deny it than a call of nature. I prayed to my sunlit Christ to deny

pulsion to do as he'd bid me. I retreated to the opposite side of the room and set Lewis down carefully. He was staring as if fascinated at the prisoner.

"What on earth are you?" my friend inquired.

"And what are you?" mocked the other. "But, you see, I know the answer to that question. We know all about you, and you know nothing about us. You passed through the disruption field, clearly."

"Was that what it was?" Lewis's head lolled sideways. "Eogan, hold me up so I can see him!" I obliged while the prisoner giggled at us.

"Yes, and it works well, apparently! Mother will be so happy. My uncles will learn a lot from you, when they open up that ticking head of yours. Though of course we'll all have to move now. We'll have learned enough to improve our defenses next time, at least!" The creature smiled nastily. Real fear showed in Lewis's eyes.

"What are you?" I demanded, sifting through my memory for old tales I'd heard from other children. "Are you a *luporchan*?"

That sent him into gales of shrill laughter. "Of course I am! Of course I am, slave, and what's more, I'm a prince among *luporchans*! Son of the queen. Though I'm a bad prince and in royal disfavor, as you can see." He rattled his chains at us.

"Oh, shut up," Lewis snapped at him. "You're some kind of



WHEN WE WERE IN, AND THE DOOR THAT IT HAD NO HANDLE, AND I

them power over me; still I obeyed them, got to my feet, and picked up Lewis. His head hung down like a broken doll's, and I was certain I'd killed him; but as I moved to follow the pale children, I heard him murmuring inexplicably: "*Mass hysteria*, was it? *Faked photographs*, was it?" in tones of indignation.

Down the long, dark hall we went. The air was warm, reeking with strange animal smells. We came to a door, neatly made, and the pale children bid me put my shoulder against it and push my way in. I shoved through into a tiny stone chamber lit by white glass beyond the door. "Watch out! Careful of my head!" fretted Lewis as his head nearly knocked on the jamb. Then we were in, and the door had swung shut after us, and I saw that it had no handle on the inside, and the silky voices had stopped, and I felt like a fool in a trap, which I was.

Behind me I heard a hiss of indrawn breath.

"Guests," mused a voice in Latin. "How fortunate I am."

"Eogan, turn around!" cried Lewis, in a tone of distinct alarm.

I whirled about, expecting a dragon, at least, but saw instead a pale child in chains sitting against the wall.

No, not a child. On his big head were wisps of hair, and a thin, wispy beard trailed from his chin; his gender was evident, if small as a baby's. He had a nose, too, and a bitter, thin mouth, and wide, pale eyes that were fixed on us with an expression of malevolent amusement.

"Slave," he told me, "bring the machine-man here. I'd like a look at him."

"Slave yourself," I replied, though I'd felt the strongest com-

half-human hybrid, aren't you? And that poor boy from the monastery was being brought here to make more like you, wasn't he?"

"Was Mother feeling lustful again?" The prince shook his head. "Another hairy little baby, I suppose, and perhaps he'll be as disobedient as me. That's the price we pay, though, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Lewis licked his lips. "Listen, if they're going to dismantle me, will you at least tell me what you people are?"

"What *we* are?" The prince frowned. Then he leaned forward in his chains, looking sly. "I'll tell you a story, *fili*. No harp to accompany me? Too bad. You'll just have to make up the music in your head as we go along.

"This is *The Tale of the Three Branches*.

"In the Beginning, the great World-Tree bore three branches, and from each branch came a son. The eldest son was wide and strong, practical and brave, but not very imaginative. The second son was tall and graceful, creative and gifted, but prone to silliness and instability."

"I wonder if you're describing Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons," speculated Lewis.

"Is that what they call themselves? The third son was small and weak and unfortunately something of an idiot, but he had one talent: He could invent clever things. *He* wasn't clever himself, you understand, in fact he could barely speak or think, but he had an affinity for patterns and systems. And from these three sons of these three branches came the races of Men.

"And the children of the two older sons were able to reason

and speak with each other, and they interbred, and the powerful and clever ones made war on the kin of the youngest son, to take by force the ingenious things they made. It was difficult for ideas to penetrate the heads of the kin, but this much got through to them: They must at all costs defend themselves against the big people, and hide from them somehow. And so this was what the stupid things focused on, with the dedication of ants, to the exclusion of all else, for all eternity, while their big cousins invented Civilization and Trade and Art!

"But the more they stayed in their hiding places, the stupider and weaker they became, as generations passed, and it became pitifully easy for the big people to find them, and raid them, and rape their queens. But then a remarkable thing happened! Half-breed children, born in the dark warrens of the kin, were bigger and cleverer and braver than the others! And they became the leaders, because it occurred to them they *could* lead. So the kin prospered, and found better places to hide, and made more ingenious devices for protecting themselves. And this way, for a while, they had the advantage in the long, long game of Hide and Seek.

"Sadly, this advantage was lost." The prince glared at Lewis. "It seems that at the other end of Time, the big people found a way to create a new race, unnatural and immortal, clockwork and flesh mingled, a disgusting alteration of humanity. Of

hear of it, and I wouldn't stop, and so here I am."

"How sad for you. Well, this has all been very interesting, but I think I'll leave now," Lewis told him airily. I looked at him, astonished at his nerve. "I have no intention of letting anyone take me apart, thank you very much. Shall we go, Eogan?"

"How?" The prince gave an incredulous grin. "Have you noticed there's no handle on the inside of this door, and it's flush with the wall?"

Lewis ignored him. "Eogan, feel in the lapel of my cloak. You ought to find a long rod of metal, very thin and fine. Take it out." I did as he asked and found it, sewn into the lining. A moment's work with my penknife, and I had it in my hand.

"Now, bend the end into a hook."

"What can you hope to accomplish?" the prince demanded. "There's no lock you can pick, either!"

"Now, slide the hook end under the door and pull it inward." I obeyed him. The prince started up in his chains, staring in horror as the simplicity of the solution occurred to him.

"Those idiots—! But you, my fine machine, you're broken now. You think this big oaf can repair you? You're helpless, and they'll come after you, my uncles will, if it takes them years! They'll get you back no matter where you hide, and then—"

"Not at all! You see, when my primary system failed, my emergency backup system began broadcasting a distress signal,"

HAD SWUNG SHUT AFTER US, AND I SAW FELT LIKE A FOOL IN A TRAP, WHICH I WAS.

course they made them a slave race—"

"Oh, we are not either," Lewis said testily.

"—and they reached back through Time to plant these vile alterations in every civilization, to act as their agents, their spies, their thieves. Need I mention that one of their objectives was to find us, and help themselves to our useful inventions?"

"No, that's certainly not true!" Lewis objected. "They don't even believe you exist! If they had, they'd have warned me about you. But I was always told you people were a late twentieth-century hoax!"

What that meant I couldn't fathom, but this much was becoming clear to me: Lewis's crazy story must be true, somehow. His enemies knew what he was, and how to harm him. These people were the incubi, the demons the Bible warned us about. But where in Scripture would I find Lewis, amongst what peoples of the Earth?

"Not a slave race, eh?" retorted the prince. "You know what they think you need to know, nothing more! And I'm sure my marvelous moron uncles will learn things from your dismantled carcass that will give us the mechanical advantage once again."

Lewis looked terrified, but he gave a disdainful little laugh. "So your own people can forge stronger chains for you? Why are you a prisoner, by the by?"

"Politics!" snarled the prince. "I had my own plan for furthering our kin. Why not creep out to the big women as they sleep? Why shouldn't they bear and raise our half-breeds? Why shouldn't we live in the sunlight like you? But Mother wouldn't

Lewis said in a taunting tone. "My masters are already on their way to rescue me. I'll be repaired. Pull open the door, Eogan."

"Ha! What you have failed to realize is that this whole mound is shielded with lead," shrieked the prince triumphantly. "Your signal hasn't reached anyone!"

Lewis's grin faltered for just a second, but he turned it into a sneer of defiance. "Well—as soon as I'm clear of this mound, my signal will be heard. And then my masters will come after *you*! See how you like—"

"If you've finished threatening each other," I said, being the only man in the room who could actually move, "the hallway's clear." I looked out into the stinking, half-lit way.

"Then I'm on my way, short circuit or no short circuit!" Lewis crowed. Bracing the open door with my body, I got hold of him by one arm and dragged him out with me.

"I'll raise the alarm!" cried the prince, but as the door swung slowly shut on its counterweight I heard him subside and mutter: "On the other hand, would anyone thank me in the least? Why *bother*?"

"I'll have to carry you again," I said, taking Lewis's other arm to hoist him up; but he got a distracted look in his eyes.

"Listen!" he said. "Do you hear it? There's somebody else. Someone's weeping."

I listened. "I can't hear anything!"

"There's another mortal here," Lewis told me. "Brother Crimthann? We've still got to rescue him!" Which shamed me, because my earnest desire was to run from there without

looking back, Christian as I was and him no more than a pagan, or perhaps less.

But I pulled him with me deeper into the hill, and we found another door, ten paces on. Even I could hear the weeping then; and when we pushed it open, Brother Crimthann screamed and cowered back in his chains.

"Hush! It's you we've come for, man!" I told him. He mastered his terror enough to be silent, pressing his hands over his mouth even as tears ran down his face. He smelled of shame. I left Lewis in the doorway and knelt beside Crimthann, turning his manacles this way and that to look for a keyhole, a seam, anything that I might force to open them. Nothing there! The rings were smooth and featureless, neither iron nor bronze. I pulled so that Crimthann flinched and whimpered, but they held fast.

"I can't break his bonds!" I told Lewis. He groaned.

"Let me see them," he said, so I pulled him in and wedged the door with my foot, painfully. He studied the manacles a moment as I strained to hold him up, and Crimthann blinked back his tears in confusion.

"I was afraid of this," said Lewis. "I can disable them, but it'll drain my backup system. Can't be helped. Listen, Eogan! This may well finish me. Don't leave my body here! If you can carry it out, my company will be able to locate me, and they'll come. Now,



I ONLY STARED, TOO SHOCKED WAS THEN THAT MY FAITH DIED

take my hand and set it on that panel, there, above his head."

I looked up at the little square of blinking lights, bright unnatural colors. "Do you mean this will kill you?" I asked, appalled.

"Oh, no, we don't die. I'm sure they can repair me. But the charge will probably erase—I wonder if it'll erase my *mind*?" I saw his pupils go wide as the possibilities sank in. "My—what if all my memories are gone?"

"Then Christ have mercy on you," I replied, for even then I still believed. I lifted his hand as he bid me and laid it against the panel. He sighed once; I felt a stinging shock go through Lewis's body, then, and he made a terrible sound. The panel hissed and spat like a demon unmasked, but the manacles fell away from Crimthann's wrists.

Crimthann needed no urging—he fell forward and crawled at once for the door. Lewis's eyes were blank and blind now. I thought he must surely be dead; but I kept faith and bore him with me out of that cell. We ran for our lives through the tunnel, Crimthann and I, and when I saw the black grate set in the floor I sprang across it with the salmon-leap of the old heroes I so admired. No lightning struck me as I hurtled free of the dangerous place: Falling fair, I kept running with Lewis, and did not stop until we came out into clean air.

I fell and rolled on the cold hillside. It was gray dawn, the sun not yet risen on Beltane morning, with the clouds in the east all underlit red. Behind me, Brother Crimthann staggered out and fell on his face to lie shivering and sobbing.

I rose on my knees at once and turned Lewis over. "Enogera-

seiromemymllafitahW," he babbled, blinking rapidly, and his spine arched back until I thought it would surely snap. Then he went limp again. He opened his eyes and looked around.

"Well," he whispered. "Lucky me. Even my backup system has a backup." He paused for a moment, as if listening to himself, and his face grew sad. "Oh. Not for long, though. It's just transmitting my location. My organic parts seem to be shutting down." He raised desperate eyes to my face. "Remember, Eogan! The *Codex Druidae*—you must bury it under the floor! And you won't tell what I confessed to you, about what I am—Oh, God, is this it? Is this what happens to you?"

There was only one thing I could do for him. "What kind of child were you created from?" I asked him. "Had it ever received Christ's grace?"

"What?" He searched my face, bewildered. "No! I was abandoned in the temple at Aquae Sulis!" He gave a hysterical giggle. "Some Roman matron's holiday indiscretion, I've no doubt, left behind at the spa, a little unwanted souvenir. . . ."

"You won't die," I told him confidently. I swept my hands through the grass that was pearled with the dew of Beltane morning, and I washed that high fine brow of his with it. "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

I think I expected a vision of Christ then, or a blare of heav-

enly trumpets at least; but nothing of the sort happened. Lewis endured the sacrament patiently and smiled a small, polite smile.

"Why, how nice. You've given me a soul." His smile widened in ironic amusement. "Now I'll live forever, won't I?"

But the color was going out of his face, and then it left his eyes, and they closed, and he was no more than a waxen doll on the hillside. I rose to my feet and looked full into the rising sun. All the birds were singing.

AND EVEN THEN I HAD NOT LOST MY FAITH. I carried Lewis down from Dun Govaun, with Brother Crimthann silent beside me, and we returned to the community. The Abbess was moved to tears that the brave pagan had given his life to rescue our brother. Yet everyone agreed the story had a happy ending—for hadn't he accepted Christ's grace and gained an immortal soul? And his body was laid on a bier in our little church, and we celebrated a grand funeral Mass for him; and that night I kept the dead watch for my friend, alone with the tall candles around his body and my sorrow and exhaustion.

At some hour in the night I opened my eyes and they were there, the two strangers. One was a knave in oil-stained clothes; the other wore the fine garments of a gentleman. They were standing at the bier, and the knave had his hand on Lewis's face, prizing open one eye with his dirty thumb. I leaped to my feet.

The gentleman turned coolly to face me. "I suppose you're the one we have to thank." He gave a brief bow. "My name is Aegeus. We've come to collect our friend, here."

"Can you make him live again?" I asked.

"That's what we're determining now." He nodded at the knave, who had pulled open Lewis's mouth and was examining his teeth. I didn't like to see him handled so disrespectfully. "What do you think, Barry?"

"Maybe." The knave gave Lewis's hair a casual tousle. "Most of the organs have died. He'll be in a regeneration vat for a few years, but he might be all right."

"What about his memories?" I begged them. "The things he knows! All those stories!"

"Probably wiped out," the knave yawned. "Maybe retrievable. We won't be able to tell for a while."

This so broke the heart in me that I knelt down, with tears brimming in my eyes. The one who called himself Aegeus paced close and stood over me.

"But let's talk about you, my friend. You've seen a lot more than you ought to have seen. What are we going to do about you, eh?" I looked up at him sharply. He was smiling a hard smile.

"I took a vow," I told him in indignation. "To bury that damned silly book and keep silent about what he had to tell me. I don't break vows!" It was true, then.

"That's right; the silence of the confessional!" he reflected, and his face became much friendlier. "Well, then. Perhaps we

TO REPLY. I THINK IT IN ME UTTERLY.

can do business, after all. A mortal who can keep his mouth shut can benefit from being our friend, you know. What do you want in life, anyway? Land? Cattle? Or, wait, you're a monk. Something pretty for your church, here?" He waved a hand and looked around.

"Only heal him." I nodded at Lewis. "Only save his mind, if you can!" I thought of all the stories of enchantment Lewis knew, all the remarkable people he must have met, the things he must have seen: Rome in its decline, perhaps the Blessed Patrick, perhaps even the old heroes when they breathed mortal air and hunted the red deer.

"Of course we'll make every effort. He's a highly valued operative, after all," Aegeus told me. "Now, look. You do as he told you, and keep your vow of silence, and you'll be a fortunate man. We've got to go now; but I'll see you again. Let's go, Barry."

"Right," replied the knave, and he pulled Lewis from the bier and threw him over his shoulder like so much merchandise. They walked toward the door.

"But his body!" I cried. "It'll be gone! What will I tell the others?"

Aegeus stopped and turned, tapping his upper lip thoughtfully with one finger. He grinned. "Ah! You can tell them a miracle occurred. The Holy Angels came and carried him off bodily to Heaven! This is an ignorant age. They ought to believe that."

I only stared at them, too shocked to reply; and he waved cheerily, and they walked out into the darkness. I think it was then that my faith died in me utterly.

Yet in the end I told his lie, for I could think of nothing else. My brothers and sisters rejoiced, and the story spread, and poor Lewis became venerated as a local saint. But I knew the lie for what it was. And as I thought over the whole story—what the prince had said, what Lewis had revealed of himself—nowhere in it could I find any trace of Christ's power, or His mercy, or His love. My God was irrelevant to those pale folk hiding in their mound, and to that knave in his oil-stained clothes.

And for all that we had a celebrated saint and a miracle to call our own, the peace of our community had been broken. Though there was never any molestation after that: The night after Lewis's body was taken away, a violent thunderstorm hit and brilliant lights played about on Dun Govaun. Perhaps the kin had fled to some new hiding place, or perhaps Lewis's company had avenged his injury.

But Brother Crimthann tried to hang himself one night; and though he was caught and survived, our Abbess had to watch him continually like a child, for he would weep and rage at the smallest thing.

My life was no joy to me, either. I kept faith with Lewis—I found the lead casket and buried the *Codex Druidae* where he'd bid me, deep down under the stones of the scriptorium floor. For all I know it's there still. Indeed, I have assurance it must be. I found his harp, too, and kept it safe, though it broke my heart to see it and remember his voice. I thought perhaps the two strangers might come back to claim it. The more I thought about this, though, the more I began to dread the idea; so one night I took the harp, and what little I owned, and, breaking my vows, I fled the community to lose myself in a distant place.

It was for nothing, anyway. On the third night of my exile, I woke in the heather to find Aegeus crouching beside me.

"This'll never do, you know," he told me sternly. "You're supposed to stay where we can keep an eye on you."

"I buried your book!" I sat up. "I've told your lies. Leave me in peace, can't you?"

"Can't do that, I'm afraid." He shook his head. "You're a security risk. Look, we're not so bad. You'll have to come with me, now, but you'll be all right. You'll work for us and live a long, happy life."

So I went with him in his strange ship, and I learned more of the way the world is run—no Christ there running it, either—and I was given lands and livestock and a fine house. All I must do is open my door on certain nights to certain strangers who come and depart in haste, after meals and a change of clothes and horses. Sometimes they leave packages that other strangers come and collect later.

They seldom answer my questions, and never my inquiries about Lewis; so I fear that they failed to save him, though in most other respects they seem as powerful as gods. I have seen many things that men would think were miracles. For all this I am supplied with every comfort a man might want for his flesh. My masters seem to think it will make me happy.

But I have not been happy since: Until this last Samhain night, when I lay in my too-comfortable bed with banked coals warming the room, very unlike the hard pallet on chilly stone in the place where I was blessed.

I heard my name called, there in the darkness. I sat up and saw Lewis, just as he had been, brightly lit as though he stood in

sunlight. He looked puzzled.

"Am I having a dream?" he wanted to know.

"No; it must be me dreaming, because you're dead," I told him.

"Dead?" He looked appalled. His jaw hung slack a moment before the memory seemed to come back to him. "Good Lord, what am I doing here, then?"

"Well, I—I'd supposed you'd come back to offer me spiritual comfort," I ventured.

He shook his head dubiously.

"Sorry, old fellow, I haven't a clue. Unless—perhaps they've succeeded in reactivating me!" His eyes lit up, and he rubbed his hands together. "Not that that explains how I got here, but I'm not complaining."

"But you're not really here," I pointed out.

"Of course I am! Look!" He made a grab for a pitcher that sat on the table, but his hand passed straight through it. He overbalanced slightly and righted himself.

"Damn! How embarrassing." He frowned. "Well—I suppose the possibility exists that I'm actually floating in a regeneration vat at a company repair facility, and I'm coming to you now by means of some sort of electromagnetic projection."

"What on earth does that mean?" I rubbed my eyes wearily.

"I don't know how I'd explain it to you. Actually, I don't know if it's even possible." He frowned thoughtfully. "No, I think I'm the one having the dream, and you're the illusion. That must be it. I'm in a nice warm vat somewhere, with all my mortal parts busily being regenerated, and my brain's come back online and I'm having a rather peculiar dream. Still . . . you don't look well, Eogan."

"I've lost my faith."

"Gosh, I'm sorry to hear it." He looked sympathetic. He seemed to be searching in his mind for something nice to say, and then an expression of incredulous delight crossed his face. "Great Caesar's Ghost! You don't suppose that baptism business actually worked, do you? You don't suppose this is my soul talking to you now?" He took a few swaggering steps back and forth.

"Oh, Lewis, I wish I could believe that." I leaned my head in my hand.

"I suppose I don't believe it either. But how can we know for sure? Wouldn't you like to believe that your God would let me into your Christian Heaven? Assuming I died, of course?"

"More than anything, Lewis. If there is such a place, you'll be there. But I don't know. I used to know," I replied, anguished.

"Oh, who knows anything? If you're simply the result of my nutritive solution being a bit rich, then I'll wake up when they decant me and go on about my business of making money for them, forever and ever and ever. And if I'm nothing more than your dream—maybe sent to you because your Christ wanted to cheer you up a little—then you'll wake up in the morning and go on with your mortal life until it's over. Let's be happy, Eogan. Your life's too short, and mine's too long, to mourn. Do something that gives you joy."

"What?" I demanded. "What, in God's name, can I do?"

"Oh, I don't know." He waved his hand. "You used to enjoy writing, didn't you?"

That was when the stranger, arriving late and pounding on

my door, woke me to a black room and unrelieved night.

But then I dared this thing, to write down what I'd seen, and my heart hasn't been so light in ages. Lewis was right: This is real joy to me, the dance of my goose quill across the bare page. Perhaps it would violate nobody's trust to begin it again, the copying down of knowledge. I'm not fit for the Gospels anymore, but I remember so many of the hero-tales Lewis told me. The community at Malinmhor has only the one copy we made. I could set them down again.

I will. I'll uncover the harp and watch as the sunlight moves across the fine wood and glints on the strings. I'll imagine Lewis sitting there talking to me, sipping the heather-honey mead, or singing as the birds chatter in the soft air beyond the stone windowsill. We'll set Finn galloping with his band of heroes, and Cuchulainn will perform terrible wonders, and it will all flow out of my pen like sunlight. God have mercy on me, a miserable sinner; what other grace can I hope for? 🏴



about the author

Kage Baker was born in Hollywood on June 10, 1952, and was raised in the Pismo Beach home where she still lives. She worked for several years as a teacher of Elizabethan English for the Living History Centre, as well as a stage manager, director, bit player, and educational program assistant. She is best known for her Company series featuring the immortal operatives Mendoza and Joseph.

Kage's most recent novel is Sky Coyote, published by Harcourt Brace in 1999. Her next novel, Mendoza in Hollywood, is scheduled to be released in January 2000.

about the illustrator

A 1978 graduate of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, Greg Couch began his illustration career full-time in 1983. He has produced work for Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp, a full-length video for Rabbit Ears Productions, and worked on character design for the upcoming Disney movie, The Kingdom of the Son. An award-winning illustrator, he is currently finishing work on his ninth children's book.



Couch lives in Nyack, New York, with his wife Robin, daughter Emily, and their three cats.

Amazing facts

THIS FRANK PAUL COVER, published in November 1927, is based on the story "The Machine Man of Ardathia" by Francis Flagg. The cute little guy in the glass cylinder has traveled nearly thirty thousand years back in time to show this human how his descendants can expect to look and function.

Although the visitor can never leave his glass cage, as he tells his startled host, he does have several features this primitive man did not, including a ray emitter that holds the man suspended in midair. The look of envy on the Ardathian's face might have been inspired by a question he asks in the story: "Tell me, is that really hair on your head?"

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AMAZING STORIES

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*Even though Londo's the emperor, he's not in charge.
But that doesn't mean he's not in control.*

The Shadow of his Thoughts

BY J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

The dream was the same.

It was *always* the same.

The chakat lay on the ground before him, its four legs bound by ropes, horns scratching the dry ground beneath its head. The sun was hot overhead.

A voice, always the same voice, whispered from behind Londo. *You know what you have to do. What you have always done.*

Londo stared at the creature, and its gaze met his own. The eyes that looked back at him were fierce, proud, unbowed. And somehow familiar. In the dream it said to him, soundlessly and wordlessly but with absolute clarity, *It is duty. You cannot fight duty.*

I can't do it, Londo thought back, and looked down. The sword was in his hand.

Yes, you can, it thought at him, and it struggled to raise its head, exposing its throat. Waiting for the death blow.

Sobbing, Londo brought down the sword, and watched the life fade away in the creature's eyes.

Tears fresh on his face, Londo awoke to the sound of bells. Bells that had tolled for one hour each morning every day for the last six days. Six days since he had taken on the role of emperor; six days since the bombardment of Centauri Prime had left vast tracts of the capital city devastated and in flames. All work stopped while the bells tolled, and the world was momentarily united in silence for those who had died in a conflict that should never have happened . . . a conflict that had been secretly engineered by the alien race known as the Drakh to produce rage and resentment in his people—emotions that he would have to nurture into something darker with the passing of years.

That was, after all, his job.

The title of emperor was just a cover, also arranged by the Drakh . . . a means to an end.

But I'm not supposed to think these things, he reminded himself as he felt the presence of the Keeper stirring at the juncture where his shoulder met alien flesh, where nerves and neural pathways merged so that his will was no longer entirely his own. He was able to shield only his most private thoughts; if he subvocalized or brought his thoughts to the surface, the Keeper could sense the shape of them, and relay them by telepathic link to the Drakh, working quietly in the recesses and ancient tunnels beneath the royal palace . . . building a future for his world whose shape he did not like to consider for too long. But at least it *was* a future, which is more than his people would have had if he had refused to accept the Keeper.

No one else could see the Keeper unless it allowed them to see it, which was usually a prelude to extermination. He, on the other hand, could see it all the time, but tried desperately not to let his gaze wander in that direction more than necessary.

Denial had always been one of his greatest strengths.

The bells stopped. Had it really been an hour already? He closed his eyes as he did when he was a child, against mornings that came too soon, hoping somehow that the day and his responsibilities would disappear, and he could be free. It was a fleeting hope and, like all hopes, daily crushed under the weight of the waking world.

He opened his eyes, the moment passed, and Emperor Mollari the Second rose to begin the seventh day of his rule.

Minister Vole was wringing his hands again, one over the other in a motion so tight that Londo couldn't tell where one hand finished and the other began. "I'm sure His Excellency was informed—"

"If I had been informed, then I would know. Since I knew nothing of this until you mentioned it, then either I was not

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE DORMAN

informed, or I have suddenly gone senile and should be taken out and shot. Which of those possibilities are you suggesting is the case here?"

Vole's hands moved faster. "I meant no offense, Excellency, because certainly Your Excellency's memory is in perfect condition, the whole world is confident in Your Excellency's magnificent abilities and—"

"Vole?"

"Yes, Excellency?"

"Shut up."

"Yes, Excellency."

The minister stepped back out of the way as Londo regarded the ornate carriage that had been brought into the circular drive behind the palace. He had, of course, seen it many times before, at traditional ceremonies and other formal occasions, but rarely this close. It had been built twelve hundred years earlier, during the reign of Emperor Morell, as a gift for his wife Celina. Not long thereafter, she went mad and hanged herself from the highest of the palace's four towers. Londo wondered if there was a cause-and-effect relationship there, given the garish bad taste that had gone into the design of the carriage, the almost grotesque indulgence of encrusting it end to end with every gemstone to be found on Centauri Prime.

If I had to ride in this thing every day, I'd probably kill myself, too.

"Is this really necessary?" Londo asked resignedly, already suspecting the answer.

Minister Vole nodded. Londo stared at the minister's hands. Vole whipped them behind his back and continued nodding. "It is tradition, Your Excellency."

"I know the tradition," Londo said, and sighed. He wondered absently which of the four towers in the palace was, in fact, the highest.

One never knew when that sort of information could come in handy.

He knew the tradition. And the story. He had grown up with both. And now he was about to enter into the tradition himself.

So it came to pass that in the third year of his reign, Emperor Morell was returning to the royal palace with his soldiers, after winning the Battle of Scoria Plains against those who would rend the people of the land in two. He stopped by the river Tuwain to water his dromes and rest his soldiers after the long march from the sea.

There he found the woman Malia, who the villagers said was a prophetess. For twenty and four years she had lived in a cave at the mouth of the Tuwain, surviving on the kindness of those in the village. She was brought before the emperor and asked to foretell the story of his rule. Malia prophesied that a great danger lay ahead of Emperor Morell, that a dagger would strike to his heart from near his heart, and that his life would be forfeit unless he heeded her warning. When the emperor asked how he could avoid this death, Malia spoke only of the crescent moon hidden in darkness.

Asked to put a price on her prophecy, she asked for nothing save the emperor's good wishes, for she was his loyal and steadfast servant.

Upon his return to the royal palace, a great dinner was held in honor of Emperor Morell. There his family gathered, including his nephew Elfeni, whose name was dear to him. As Elfeni rose to toast the health of his uncle, Emperor Morell saw a brooch on his nephew's garment, a crescent moon hidden by the shadow of his arm. In that instant, the emperor cried out and the Imperial Guard seized Elfeni, stopping him as he drew back a blade to strike down the emperor. Elfeni later confessed to a secret alliance with those who had attempted to bring about a civil war in which he would be made emperor.

His life saved by prophecy, the emperor returned to Tuwain, where he gave the prophetess Malia a tenth share of his fortune. He pledged that for as long as an emperor sat upon the throne of Centauri Prime, there would always be a prophetess in Tuwain, that she would ever be in royal favor, her needs and wants attended to, her name revered.

And so it was that over the years, with the passing of each prophetess, another came to take her place in Tuwain. On that day, each emperor would travel by the same carriage and the same road taken by Morell to Tuwain, to personally oversee her enshrinement as prophetess supreme.

The last prophetess in the line that began with Malia had died in the bombardment; another now had to take her place, and Londo had to be there for the ceremony.

He could not justify it. There was work to be done, temples to be rebuilt, wounded to heal—

—grudges to nourish, rage to fuel—

—so that he could hardly justify being away from the royal palace for that long.

And yet . . .

And yet what was the purpose of rebuilding if it was not part of the process of healing the wounds that his people had suffered? And was not part of that process restoring a sense of stability?

That was the purpose of tradition, to give people something to hold onto in times of trouble.

And was there any trouble greater than the bombardment and savaging of Centauri Prime . . . and the other trouble that Londo knew was biding its time beneath the royal palace?

Londo sighed again, knowing his decision was inescapable, as most of his decisions lately had been.

He would go to Tuwain.

As was required, they set out before dawn, the royal carriage in the middle of a long procession of other ceremonial carriages and drome-pulls. Crowds lined the streets and waved as they passed, faces lined with worry and the dirt of rebuilding momentarily eclipsed by smiles. Londo nodded back at them through the open window, even more sure now that his decision was the proper one.

Once outside the capital city, they turned to the old roads,

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which were now overgrown and little used. The crowds grew smaller and appeared less often, until they disappeared altogether. From time to time Londo glimpsed a lone traveler walking along the road who looked on, astonished, at the passing parade. The rest of the time he was left alone with his thoughts, and he little cared for the company. He did best when the business of rebuilding left him no time to dwell on his situation, or the choices that had brought him to this point. But alone in the carriage, with only the bumps in the road and the silent forests on either side to keep him company, he was left only with his thoughts, his doubts, his recriminations—

—and the occasional whisper from the Keeper residing invisibly on his shoulder, reminding him of the things they needed him to do upon his return to the palace.

He wanted a drink desperately, but since his gradual discovery that alcohol was the one thing that could buy him a moment's privacy from the Keeper (*don't think it too loud, don't let them know you've figured that part out yet, it's the only tool you have*), he saved that for moments when it could be used to his advantage.

By night they camped by the side of the road, where he could at last contact the royal palace by viewer and receive updates on the state of his people. Then a few hours of fitful sleep, and back on the road again.

On the third day out, another procession caught up with his own. The carriages were white, lined with white veils, and drawn by pure white dromes. Londo recognized the markings and knew that they contained the new prophetess of Tuwain.

He emerged and went to meet them. As he drew closer, the doors of the main white carriage opened, and amid a shower of white flower petals, the prophetess emerged with her entourage. She was dressed all in white, her face veiled; even so, Londo could see her well enough, and took a breath in astonishment.

She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

And she could not have been more than sixteen seasons.

This can't be right, Londo thought. *She's too young by far.*

As he stopped before them, an older woman—the young girl's escort, he supposed—bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty," she said. "I am Delasi Miro of House Miro. It is my honor to present to you Shiri Dei of House Dei, whom I am honored to serve as guardian."

"It is an honor, good lady," Londo said, his curiosity piqued even further. Under Centari law, to be guardian was to speak on all matters of importance for someone too young to speak for himself or herself. Anyone wishing to benefit from Shiri's prophecies would have to go through Delasi first. *Interesting*, he thought. "Are you the child's mother?"

"No, Highness, her mother died in childbirth. She has been raised by her father."

"Ah. And where is he?"

"He did not come. His . . . business does not allow him to be away for long periods, and it was decided that she would do better on her own."

Londo smiled. *It was decided* almost always meant *I decided it would be to my best advantage, but I don't want to say that*. He looked now to the young girl. "Is this what you wanted, child?"

She spoke without looking up. "I am my emperor's servant, and I gladly honor him with my utmost obedience."

"A fine answer," he said, and glanced sharply at the older woman. "Also well rehearsed."

Delasi smiled and nodded. "She takes instruction well, and wishes only to be of service."

"Of course," Londo said. "Perhaps the two of you would care to ride with me in the royal carriage. We could talk further."

The girl glanced up for a moment, and looked almost frightened. Delasi only nodded. "We would be most honored, Your Majesty."

"And how long have you been a prophetess?" Londo asked. The countryside passed slowly outside the carriage.

"She has been able to *see* since she was barely a child of three seasons," Delasi said.

"An advanced case, to be sure," Londo said. "You would almost think that a child who could *see* at three could be allowed to *speak* at sixteen."

Delasi's lips pursed in a way Londo found most satisfying. Any farther, and he was sure her face would disappear entirely into her head. It was a trick he would actually pay to see. With her silence won, for the moment at least, he looked back to Shiri. "What can you tell me of my future, child?" he asked.

For the first time, she met his gaze. Her eyes were windows onto an old soul, framed with resignation and a sorrow that should never have been allowed into one so young. Her gaze seemed to pass right through him, to a place somewhere behind his head. Then she looked away again. "Perhaps His Majesty would prefer to hear of other things," she said.

"The emperor asked you a question," Delasi said. "Answer truthfully."

Shiri considered her words carefully. "I see little joy, and much sorrow," she said at last. "I see fire and death and pain. I see you betrayed by almost everyone you have ever trusted."

"Almost everyone?"

"Your greatest enemy is also your greatest friend, and the trust you place in him is rewarded at the end of days. He is your freedom, and you are his. And in the end . . ." She hesitated, then forced herself to continue. "In the end, you die in the arms of your friend, and he dies in yours, that a world might live."

For a moment, Londo felt the world slide out from under him. The image she described was a dream that had always been with him, the dream of his own death, in which he and G'Kar of Narn ended their long and strange relationship by strangling one another to death. It was a relationship born in mutual hatred, the kind of rage that only a conquered people can have against those who have enslaved them, as Centauri Prime had enslaved Narn. G'Kar had grown from a resistance fighter to a leader among his people following their liberation, and had finally been assigned as ambassador to Babylon 5, as Londo had in his earlier days. There they had fought, and squabbled, and gradually carved out a mutual respect that had, impossibly, grown into something approaching friendship.

Until this moment, he had always believed that the dream pointed to a final act of vengeance by one against the other.

THE SHADOW OF HIS THOUGHTS

But now, in her words, for the first time he allowed himself the possibility of hope. *That a world might live*, she had said. But which world? Narn or Centauri Prime?

He stirred, realizing that he had sat silent for too long. He cleared his throat. "And what else do you see?"

Her face darkened again, and her gaze drifted to his shoulder. Londo felt for a moment that she could see what was there, what no one else could see. *Impossible*, he thought. But the Keeper felt it too, and Londo sensed it go quiet . . . watching, waiting.

"I see . . . shadows," she said. "It is hard for me to see what sort of shadows, or what throws them, but I see pieces of shadows all over the palace, and beneath it, gradually spreading across our world. They are the ones who will bring the fire. They are the ones who will bring the pain.

"I do not know who they are," she said, "I know only *that* they are. And that they are *here*."

Londo said nothing, knowing with cold certainty how close her words were to the truth, that the Drakh had once served an advanced race known only as the Shadows, gone now, but who left behind their weapons and their servants and their allies.

Pieces of shadows indeed. Slowly he realized that this was not just a hit-and-miss prophetic, guarding her words or disguising them in metaphor and imagery. She was, as the humans said, the Real Deal. And she knew things that the Drakh would not want her or anyone else to know.

An instant later, from the Keeper on his shoulder came a whisper that slipped into the back of his thoughts, instructions relayed from the Drakh in the capital city who monitored the Keeper as it monitored Londo.

The girl must die, the Keeper whispered, and Londo's blood ran cold in his veins.

Do it yourself if you have to, the whisper continued, *but it must be done before she can take up her position.*

Before she can speak with authority, and betray our presence. She must die.

The rest of the day's ride was conducted in an uneasy silence punctuated only by occasional polite comments. Where Shiri had been the one to avoid his gaze, now Londo did the same, knowing what he knew. His thoughts raced back and forth between two poles:

If he had to do as the Drakh instructed, how could he ensure her death without compromising himself or revealing their intentions?

And, deeper in his thoughts, where he hoped the Drakh could not find it, how could he avoid having to kill her?

He was grateful for the interlude when they reached the final rest stop. The next day's journey would see them in Tuwain. While his entourage set up his tent and prepared dinner, he moved apart from them and opened the portable viewer that would put him in touch with the royal palace.

Minister Vole's face appeared on the viewer within a second of its being activated. *He's probably been sitting by the screen all day again, waiting for the call*, Londo concluded. Vole's eagerness could make even a dead man nervous. "Yes, Excellency?"

"Any news?" Londo asked.

"I'm told that repairs to the spaceport are nearly complete; we should be able to reopen the rest of it by week's end."

"Good. Contact the ministry for urban repairs and tell them to take at least an hour off to celebrate."

"I will, Excellency."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing significant. The usual requests for your attention, debates in the Centarum that need to be resolved—"

"They can wait. I need you find out everything you can concerning a woman, Delasi of House Miro."

"Of course, Excellency. Is it important?"

Londo stared at the screen. "I'm sorry. For a moment there I imagined myself to be the emperor. You see, when the emperor points to something—anything—it automatically becomes important. I am pointing to this, Vole. If you are suggesting it might be something other than important, then I must no longer be the emperor. Of course, that would imply sedition on your part, which last I heard was punishable by death, so—"

"I will get on it immediately, Excellency."

"Thank you, Minister."

The screen blipped off. Londo allowed a smile; playing with Vole was almost too easy. He found he actually missed sparring with G'Kar and Sheridan, even Vir . . . at least there he had some competition.

He closed the viewer and decided to take a walk before retiring. He signaled to the Imperial Guard, who would maintain their distance out of respect, while staying near enough to intervene should he run into trouble.

The woods near the campsite were thick with trees, their silver and gray leaves already turning black and gold in anticipation of winter. A narrow path ran through the place where they grew together the thickest. Londo walked the well-worn path with confidence, knowing he need only make a sound to attract the guards, when he heard another sound nearby.

Someone was crying.

He slowed, edging toward a clearing in the woods. There in the double moonlight he saw Shiri in the arms of a young man. He was holding her so tightly that Londo thought she might be pulled through him to the other side.

"You shouldn't have come, Corlo," she was saying. "It's dangerous."

"I don't care. I had to see you. I spoke with your father. He doesn't want you doing this any more than I do. It's that woman, Delasi . . . she pressured him into making her your guardian. She uses people. She doesn't care about you, Shiri. All she cares about is power."

"I know that, Corlo. I know what she is, and what price I will pay. But this is the only way to keep our family's honor. House Dei is without power and without money. Soon all we have will be sold or taken away. My father could even be sold into bond slavery to pay off our debts. I have a gift that guarantees that no matter what happens to me, my family will be taken care of forever. My father needs this, even if he can't see it himself. I can't turn my back on him."

Corlo pulled her from his chest and looked at her. "Can you turn your back on me?"

"I'm not—"

"Once you're enshrined at Tuwain, you are not allowed to marry, not allowed the company of any man. That's the law. We'll never be together again. Can you do that to us? Can you do that to yourself?"

"Yes," she said, and looked away. "I can. Because I have to. I have obligations. It's my responsibility, my duty—"

"Shiri, I love you."

"I know," she said, and the grief in her voice tore through Londo like a blade. "And I love you. And I love my father, and I love my family. Now I have to choose between them and you. It's not right, and it's not fair, and more than life itself I want to run away with you, right now, where no one could ever find us. But I can't, Corlo. I can't. . . ."

Then suddenly she turned and ran into the woods, heading back toward the campground. The young man called after her, but she didn't answer. He stood there for several minutes, hoping she would return, hoping for a word, a sign that somehow she might change her mind.

But she did not return, and after a while, he turned and walked slowly away, disappearing into the woods.

Out of the corner of his eye, Londo saw the Imperial Guard edging forward, to see what had caused him to stop. He waved them back, letting the silence linger in the clearing. In such a short time, how could he have come to care so much for someone he knew he would have to kill?

Londo looked up at the twin moons overhead. *What am I to do now?* he wondered. There were forty-seven gods in the Centauri pantheon; surely one of them had a solution to his problem.

The night, however, gave no reply to his question.

The dream was the same. It was always the same.

The creature lay on the hard, dry ground, its eyes staring up into his own.

You cannot fight duty.

The flash of the sword.

The tears.

Great Maker, Londo thought as he sat up, his face wet. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

It was still dark, well before dawn. As his eyes cleared, he saw the viewer blinking with a message-waiting signal. He rose, shook off the dream, and went to it.

Predictably, it was Vole. "I found the information you requested, Majesty. It took no small doing, and I went to great lengths to—"

Londo fast-forwarded for thirty seconds. That was how long it usually took Vole to explain in excruciating detail how hard it had been to find the requested information before he could finally get to the point.

"—the lady Delasi and House Miro are of old blood, but little money. They sold their position in the royal court years

ago to House Davo. Delasi herself is said to be very intelligent, though I get the impression we could substitute the word 'ruthless' and very few would argue the point. She is political, and a manipulator. Word is she has found some way to regain power and influence for herself and her House."

And her name is Shiri, Londo thought.

The rest was little more than gossip, of no real use. Londo switched off the viewer and sat quietly in the dark for a moment. He could feel the Keeper stirring, reminding him of the guards who stood outside, who could remove Shiri without question or hesitation.

If I have Shiri killed, as you ask, it will greatly complicate matters in the royal court. There will be an investigation. Even I can't arbitrarily have someone killed; there are rules since Cartagia's day. A woman like Delasi could find ways to exploit that; your position could be compromised.

Shiri must be eliminated, the Keeper relayed back.

Then let me do it in my own way.

After a long pause, the Keeper whispered back, *Very well. But we will be watching.*

In such a short time, how could he have come to care so much for someone he would have to kill?

Londo stepped out of the tent into the chill, predawn air and made his way to Shiri's tent. The guard glanced up at his approach but made no effort to stop him from entering her bedchamber.

Times had changed, but emperors still had certain . . . privileges.

Londo guessed that the same thought that had occurred to the guard also came to Shiri when she opened her eyes and saw him standing over her bed. He put a hand on her shoulder. She trembled under his touch.

"Majesty—" she began.

"Shhh . . ." Londo said.

"But I haven't . . . I have never . . ."

"I have, many times, and as the humans say, it's not all it's cracked up to be." He smiled down at her. "Don't worry. Now, put on your clothes, quickly. We have much to do, and little time in which to do it."

He led Shiri into the tented area that protected the royal carriage from the elements and dismissed the guard, who glanced back at them with obvious suspicion about what the two of them might want to do alone in the carriage.

Do I look that much the lecher? Londo thought, and decided he probably did. No matter.

Time to get to work.

Londo approached the carriage. "You start at the back," he said, "and I will begin at the front. We'll meet somewhere in the middle."

"Majesty, what am I supposed to do?"

"Have you ever plucked a bird for dinner, child?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you can help me pluck this one," he said, and twisted free a small gem from the side of the carriage. He placed it in her hand, and her eyes went wide.

"Take them carefully, one at a time, from places where there are so many that they will not be missed. By the time we meet in the middle, you will have enough to restore your family's fortune for the next five generations."

She met his gaze, and he saw suspicion there. "What will it cost me?" she asked.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "A little of your honor. It is a terrible price, but the sting passes with time. I would do it for you, but I have so little honor left that it would hardly buy you a small cottage in the outer provinces.

"Now, enough talk," he said. "Start plucking."

The sky was starting to lighten as Londo hurried back to his tent. He glanced back briefly to see the lone Imperial Guard he had assigned to the task riding off on dromeback, Shiri clinging to his back. If she looked back at him, he could not tell.

He was out of breath, but smiling broadly.

These were the moments he enjoyed most.

It took him only a few moments to rouse his entourage. He raised such a clatter and an alarm that the guards and functionaries and plenipotentiaries and escorts and chaperones and dromesmen piled into the clearing half dressed. He hid his amusement at the sight, especially when Delasi appeared in their midst, her dress hanging in ways never intended by her designer, her body, or the Great Maker.

"We have been tricked," he said, his voice carrying through the clearing. "And it is on your behalf, Delasi, that we have endured this charade."

"Majesty, I—"

"You have not been invited to speak," he snapped, and she averted her eyes. Londo turned his attention to the rest of them. "The young girl Shiri, of House Dei, is no more a prophetess than I am. She came to see me last night, in tears—tears, I tell you—over her deception. She believed she was acting in a good cause, but the weight of her pretense and the terrible secret behind it were simply too much for the poor creature to bear."

The crowd was silent, waiting for the rest. Londo let the moment grow, enjoying himself beneath his carefully outraged exterior.

"The secret . . . is that it is Delasi who is the true prophetess," he said, noting with satisfaction the look of stunned disbelief on her face. "Shiri only repeated what she was told to say by Delasi, who did not want the title of prophetess supreme because of the great burden involved. A life of solitude and responsibility, without marriage or love. Shiri was willing to sacrifice all this for the sake of our people, and allow Delasi to work through her. But here, on the night before her enshrinement, knowing the responsibility and the importance of the ceremony, she found she could no longer carry through with the deception.

"Though Shiri believed she was acting in the best interests of all involved, a lie is still a lie. So by Imperial Decree, she is

banned from any contact with the royal court. Her family is declared free of any penalties because they were innocent in this, but no one in the palace will attempt to contact her for any reason. To be shunned from our presence is surely the worst punishment that can be devised to fit the crime."

The crowd nodded. *Good*, Londo thought. *Now no one will try to contact her, which would yield information that might contradict what I've just said.*

Now for the fun part.

He started into his tent. "Lady Delasi," he shot back. "Attend."

She followed him inside. He sat and regarded her silently for a moment. She had regained some of her composure, and was studying him just as he was studying her.

"You may speak," he said.

Delasi straightened. "Majesty, I am not a prophetess."

"This is true."

"Then you knowingly lied."

He shrugged. "It is impossible to lie otherwise."

"And you expect me to go along with this?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Sit, and I will tell you," Londo said. He stretched out on the high seat as she took her place opposite him. "Let us speak plainly, Delasi. You and I, we are political creatures. We come from the same amoral gene pool. You attached yourself to Shiri because you hoped to use her to your own advantage, to exert influence over the nobles and others who would come to Tuwain seeking guidance."

"Majesty, I would never—"

"Yes, you would. With you as Shiri's guardian, they would have to go through you in order to speak with her. You could choose who was and was not allowed to see her, indulge favors, accept bribes, use your access to her, and to them, to improve the condition of House Miro.

"But now you have a unique opportunity, Delasi. You and I both know that sooner or later, Shiri would back out of the deal once she began to truly understand how you were using her. She has an annoying nobility of spirit that almost guarantees conflict over issues of morality. That problem has now been eliminated, the pebble removed from your shoe. Try as you might, Shiri would never have altered her prophecies to suit your needs. As prophetess yourself, you can say anything you want."

From her expression, Londo knew she was intrigued, but still cautious. "There is still a problem, Majesty. As I said before, I am not a prophetess. I cannot see the future."

Londo smiled. "Neither can I. What difference does it make? Our job is to tell people what they want to hear. We are much alike in that way. No one really wants to hear the truth, good lady . . . they don't really want to know how they will die, that they have sadness and pain in their future, that their name will decline with their power and their appearance; that in the end, all is swallowed by death and silence.

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breath, but
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"But those are the sorts of things that Shiri could not help but tell them, because they are true. Sadly, I suppose, they are always true. But truth has nothing to do with what people like you and I want from the world. Position. Influence. Money. As prophetess, you can say what you want, couch your intentions any way you wish, without having to include any unfortunate or untimely truths."

"And when my prophecies fail to materialize?"

"Just be sufficiently artistic—that is to say, vague—in your prophecies so that they can be reinterpreted later in whatever fashion best serves you. A prophetess once told me, 'You must save the eye that does not see.' " Londo shrugged. "It's five years later, and I still don't know what she meant."

For the first time, Delasi relaxed. Londo thought he might actually see a smile forming, but couldn't be sure.

"Tell me, Majesty, has a prophetess ever retired from Tuwain?" she asked.

"They have all been retired by death. But to all things there must be a first time. Why?"

"Well, after five or ten years of work in His Majesty's service, holding a position of such authority, I would think that a title and land would be only proper compensation. To have the presence of a renowned prophetess placed in the royal court itself would be most . . . advantageous."

"It would indeed," Londo said, and this time there was no mistaking it.

She was definitely smiling now.

Londo found the enshrinement at the river Tuwain to be a magnificent ceremony, rich in color and texture. Delasi, he thought, was quite stunning in her gown of white and gold, as she looked across the open expanse of stone and water at him with eyes that glittered like small silver coins.

Which was most appropriate. What was it the humans said about the eyes being the window of the soul . . . ? No matter, he decided. They understood one another.

The ride back to the capital seemed shorter and less odious than the ride out, even with the presence of the Keeper intruding into his thoughts from time to time.

She is still a potential threat, the voice whispered in his thoughts.

True, but she has been publicly discredited. No one will listen to her now. She is far from the palace, and will never be allowed closer, so your secret is safe. You should be reasonable. Even you cannot eliminate all of the potential threats.

Not today, perhaps, the Drakh sent back, *but there is still tomorrow.*

Yes, Londo thought, *there is always tomorrow.*

Upon arriving back at the royal palace, after his briefing from Minister Vole, Londo returned to his suite, where he found a letter waiting for him. Though he had not seen her handwriting before, he knew even before opening it that it came from Shiri.

Thank you, the note read. There is no gift that I can give you that would be the equal of the one you have given me: my freedom, and the restoration of my father's House. So I give you the only

thing I have to give, the last prophecy I intend to make.

One day, Emperor, you will be free of your burden. One day you will save our people, and all the sacrifices you make will not have been in vain.

Londo set the note down again and looked out at his dear city, framed by scaffolding, climbing its way back from the horrors of war, and was surprised to find tears running down his face.

The dream was the same. It was always the same.

The chakat lay on the ground before him, its four legs bound by ropes, horns scratching the dry ground beneath its head. The sun was hot overhead.

A voice, always the same voice, whispered from behind Londo. *You know what you have to do. What you have always done.*

Londo stared at the creature, and its gaze met his own. The eyes that looked back at him were fierce, proud, unbowed.

And in the dream, the eyes that looked back at him were the eyes of Shiri, frightened and alone . . . they were the eyes of his people as he passed them on the street . . . and then, at the last, he recognized them for what they were—his own eyes, looking up at him.

It is duty, a voice whispered. *You cannot fight duty.*

Londo looked down. The sword was in his hand.

Yes, I can, he thought back, and brought down the sword, severing the ropes that bound the creature's feet.

It staggered upright and met his gaze one last time. Then, with a power and a freedom he had never experienced before, he watched it race away, disappearing into the distance, into the woods, into the future.

The dream never came to him again. ♠

about the author



J. Michael Straczynski has a long relationship with science fiction and related genres. He has previously been the story editor and primary writer for the syndicated television series *The Twilight Zone*, and his adaptation of "The

Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde for Showtime earned him both ACE and Writers Guild nominations.

This talented executive producer/creator has worked as a story editor on *The Real Ghostbusters* animated series, as well as the live-action series *Captain Power and Jake and the Fatman*. He served as producer on the hit series *Murder She Wrote* and the *Babylon 5* telefilm and created the *Babylon 5* series.

He also has written short stories, an anthology, and two dark fantasy/horror novels. His story, "Your Move," appeared in the November 1985 issue of *AMAZING Stories*.

about the illustrator

Dave Dorman is an Eisner award-winning illustrator who has been a professional since 1983. He is best known for his oil-painted renderings of action and science fiction subjects. Maybe someday he'll take some art lessons.



BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Heal Thyself

There's a limit to how much you can shield your children from the harsh realities of life. But you can't blame parents who try. Especially when it's something you have to go out of your way to discuss. My parents assure me that they would have talked about it someday, but it's not like the birds and the bees—there's not a certain age when you have to know. They were letting it slide. I was a curious kid. I had already asked questions that could have led there. They dodged. They waffled. I understand.

But then my childhood friend, Elizio, died of complications from his leukemia vaccination. I had been given mine on the same day, right after him, after jostling in line for twenty minutes with the rest of our class of ten-year-olds. Nobody else got sick. We didn't know anything was wrong with Elizio, either, not for months. And then the radiation and the chemotherapy, primitive holdovers from an era when medicine was almost indistinguishable from the tortures of the Inquisition. Nothing worked. Elizio died. He was eleven by then. A slow passage into the grave. And I demanded to know why.

ILLUSTRATION BY
BRAD HOLLAND



*Does a kid deserve to know where
he came from? Where he
really came from?*



They started to talk about God, but I told them I knew about heaven and I wasn't worried about Elizio's soul. I wanted to know why there wasn't some better way to prevent diseases than infecting us with semi-killed pseudoviruses mixed with antigen stimulants. Was this the best the human race could do? Didn't God give us brains so we could solve these things? Oh, I was full of righteous wrath.

That was when they told me that it was time for me to take a trip to the North American Wild Animal Park. What did that have to do with my question? It will all become clear, they said. But I should see with my own eyes. Thus they turned from telling me nothing to telling me everything. Were they wise? I know this much: I was angry at the universe, a deep anger that was born of fear. My dear friend Elizio had been taken from me because our medicine was so primitive. Therefore anyone could die. My parents. My little sisters. My own

I finally found what they were
looking at. Men and women.
Long-haired. Filthy. Naked.

children someday. Nothing was secure. And it pissed me off. The way I felt, the way I was acting, I think they believed that nothing but a complete answer, a visual experience, could restore my sense that this was, if not a perfect world, then at least the best one possible.

We left Saltillo that weekend, taking the high-speed train that connected Monterrey to Los Angeles. We got off in El Paso, the southern gateway to the park. During the half-hour trip, I tried to make sense of the brochures about the park, all the pictures, the guidebooks. But it was clear to me, even at the age of eleven, that something was being left out. That I was getting the child's version of what the park contained. All that the brochures described was a vast tract of savannas, filled with wild animals living in their natural habitat, though it was an odd mixture of African, South American, European, and American fauna that they pictured. Of course, to protect the animals against the dangers of straying and the far greater menace of poaching, the park was fenced about with an impenetrable barrier—not illustrated in the brochures—of fences, ditches, wires, walls. The thing that made no sense at all, however, was the warning about absolute biosecurity. All observations of the park inside the boundaries were to take place from within completely biosealed buses, and anyone who tried to circumvent the bioseal would be ejected from the park and prosecuted. They did not say what would happen to anyone who succeeded in getting out into the open air.

Biosealed buses suggested a serious biohazard. And yet there was nothing in the brochures to indicate what that biohazard might be. It's not as if herds of bison could sneak onto the buses if you cracked the seal.

The answer to this mystery was no doubt the answer to my question about why Elizio died, and I impatiently demanded that my parents explain.

They urged me to be patient, and then took me right past the regular buses and on to a nondescript door with the

words—in small letters—"Special Tours."

"What's so special?" I asked.

They ignored me. The clerk seemed to know without explanation exactly what my parents wanted. Then I understood that my parents must have called ahead.

It was a private tour. And not on a bus. We were taken down an elevator into a deep basement, and then put aboard a train on which we rode for more than an hour—longer than the trip from Saltillo to El Paso, though I suspect we were going much slower. Underground, who can tell?

We came up another elevator, and, like the underground train, this one had no trappings of tourism. This was a place where people worked; gawking was only a secondary concern.

We were led by a slightly impatient-looking woman to a smallish room with windows on four sides and dozens of sets of binoculars in a couple of boxes. There were also chairs, some stacked, some scattered about almost randomly. As if someone hadn't bothered to straighten up after a meeting.

"Are they close?" asked Mother.

"We're here because the water is nearby," said the woman. "If they aren't close now, they will be soon."

"Where's the water?" asked Father.

The woman pointed vaguely in a direction. It's clear she didn't want us there. But Mother and Father had the gift of patience. They were here for me, and bore the disdain of the scientist. If that's what she was.

The woman went away.

My parents picked up binoculars and searched. I also picked out a set and tried to figure out how to focus it.

"It senses your vision automatically," Father explained. "Just look, and it will come into focus."

"Bacana," I said. I looked.

There was a lot of dry grassy land, interspersed with drier, sagebrushy land. In one direction were some trees. That must be where the water was.

"Spotted them yet?" Mother asked.

"To the left of the trees?" asked Father.

"There too?"

"Where did you see them?"

"In the shade of that rock."

I searched and finally found what they were looking at.

Men and women. Long-haired. Filthy. Naked.

My straitlaced parents brought me here to see naked people?

Then I looked again, more closely. They weren't exactly people after all.

"Neanderthals," I said.

"*Homo neanderthalensis*," said Father.

"They've been extinct forever!"

"For about twenty thousand years, most conservative guess," said Father. "Maybe longer."

"But there they are," I said.

"There was a long debate," said Father. "About how the Neanderthals died out."

"I thought that *Homo sapiens* wiped them out."

"It wasn't so simple. There was plain evidence of communities of *sapiens* and *neanderthalensis* living in close proximity for

centuries. It wasn't just a case of 'kill-the-monsters.' So there were several theories. One was that the two species interbred, but Neanderthal traits were discouraged to such a degree that they faded out. Like round eyes in China."

"How could they interbreed?" I asked. I was proud of my scientific erudition, as only eleven-year-olds can be. "Look at how different they are from humans."

"Not so different," said Mother. "They had rudimentary language. Not the complicated grammar we have now—basically just imperative verbs and labeling nouns. But they could call out to each other across a large expanse and give warning. They could greet each other by name."

"I was talking about how they look."

"But I was talking about brain function," said Mother, "which is much more to the point, don't you think?"

"Another theory," said Father, "was that *Homo sapiens* evolved from the Neanderthals. That one was discredited and then revived several times. It turns out that was the closest theory to being right."

"You know, none of this explains why there are Neanderthals out here in the North American Wild Animal Park."

"You surprise me, Son," said my father. "I thought you would have leaped to at least some conclusion. Instead you seem to be passively awaiting our explanation."

I hated it when Father patronized me. He knew that, so he did it whenever he wanted to goad me into thinking. It always worked. I hated that, too.

"You brought me here because of the way I reacted to Elizio's death," I said. "And because you're famous scientists yourselves, you got to pull strings and get me a special tour. Not everybody sees this, right?"

"Actually, anybody can, but few want to," said Father.

"And the biohazard stuff—that suggests some kind of disease agent. What you said about the evolved-from-Neanderthals scenario being close to correct suggests . . . there's some disease loose in the wild here that causes regular people to turn into cavemen?"

Father smiled wanly at Mother. "Smart boy," he said.

I looked at Mother. She was crying.

"Just tell me," I demanded. "No more guessing games."

Father sighed, put his arm around Mother, and began to talk. It didn't take long to explain.

"The greatest breakthrough in the medical treatment of disease was the germ theory, but it took an astonishingly long time for doctors to realize that almost all human ailments were caused by infectious agents. A few were genetic—such as cystic fibrosis and sickle-cell anemia—but those all seemed to be recessive genes that conferred a benefit when you had one of them, and killed you only if you had two. All the others—heart disease, dementia, schizophrenia, strokes, nontraumatic cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, most cancers, even some *crimes*—all were actually diseases. What disguised them from researchers for so long was the fact that these diseases were passed along in the womb, across the placenta, mostly by disease agents composed of proteins smaller than DNA. Some were passed along in the ovum. So we had no way to compare a clean, healthy

organism with an infected one until we finished mapping the human genetic code and realized that these diseases weren't there. When we finally tracked them down as loose proteins in the cells, we—"

"We?" I asked.

"I speak of our forebears, of course," said Father. "Our predecessors."

"You aren't in medical research."

"Our colleagues in science," said Father. "We've come a long way to have you quibble about my choice of pronouns. And anthropology is the science of which medicine is merely a subset."

I had a snappy retort about how nobody ever asks if there's an anthropologist in the house, but I kept it to myself, mostly because I didn't want to win points here, I wanted to hear the story.

"How do you inoculate an organism against in utero infection?" asked Mother rhetorically. "How do you cleanse an ovum that has already been infected?"

"What we developed," Father began, then interrupted himself. "What *was* developed."

"What emerged from the development process," said Mother helpfully.

"*Was*," said Father, "an elegant little counterinfection. Learning from the way these protein bits worked, the researchers came up with a protein complex that hijacked the cell's DNA just the way these infectious agents did. Only, instead of destroying the host cell, our little counterinfection caused the human DNA to check aggressively inside the cell for proteins that didn't belong there. There are already mechanisms that do bits and parts of that, but this one worked damn near perfectly. Nothing was in that cell that didn't belong there. It even detected and threw out the wrong-handed proteins that caused spongiform encephalopathies."

"Now you're showing off, my love," said Mother.

"It was perfect," said Father. "And best of all, self-replicating yet nondestructive. Once you introduced it into a mother,

Then I looked again, more closely. They weren't exactly people after all.

it was in every egg in her body after a matter of days. Any child she bore would have this protection within it."

"It was perfect," said Mother. "The early tests showed that it not only prevented diseases, it cured all but the most advanced cases. It was the ultimate panacea."

"But they hadn't tested it for very long," said Father.

"There was enormous pressure," said Mother. "Not from outside, from *inside* the research community. When you have a cure for everything, how can you withhold it from the human race for ten years of longitudinal studies, while people die or have their lives wrecked by diseases that could be prevented with a simple inoculation?"

"It had side effects," I said, guessing the end.

"Technically, no," said Father. "It did exactly what it was

supposed to do. It eradicated diseases with smaller-than-bacteria agents. Period. Nothing else. The only reason that they didn't immediately spread the counterinfection throughout the world to save as many lives as possible was because of the one foreseeable hitch. Can you think of it? It's obvious, really."

I thought. I wish I could say I came up with it quickly, but my parents were nothing if not patient. And I did come up with it after a few false tries, which I can't remember now. The correct answer: "Aging is a disease. You get this counterinfection, you don't die."

"We were concerned about a population explosion," said Mother. "Even if people completely stopped having children, we weren't sure that the existing ecosphere could sustain a population in which all the existing children grew up to be adults

It seemed too incredible to me, as an eleven-year-old who prided himself on understanding the world.

while none of the adults died off to make room for them. Imagine all the children entering the workforce, while the older generation, newly vigorous and extremely unlikely to die, refused to retire. It was a nightmare. So, by the mercy of God, the counterinfection was restricted to a large longitudinal study centered on Manhattan, a smallish college town in Kansas."

"There was a quarantine of sorts," said Father. "The participants accepted the rules—no physical contact with anyone outside the city during the two years of the study. In exchange, nobody dies of any kind of disease. They jumped at it."

"The counterinfection got loose!" I said.

"No. Everybody kept to the rules. This was science, not the movies," said Father. "But in the Manhattan Project, as we inevitably called it, for the first time the test included infants, newborns, children born after the study began, children conceived after the study began. We were so interested in the result with the aging population that it had never crossed our minds that... well, it *did* cure aging. The people who have it would never die of old age. The trouble was, the children were born—"

"As Neanderthals," I said, making the obvious guess.

"And over time," said Father, "as cells were replaced, the adult bodies also tried to reshape themselves. It was fatal for them. You can't take an existing body and make it into something else like that. You had a few years of perfect health, and then your bones destroyed themselves in the frantic effort to grow into new shapes. The little ones, the ones who were changed in the womb, only they survived."

"And that's who I'm seeing out there," I said.

Father nodded. "It took fifteen years to find a way to sterilize them all without our counterinfection undoing the sterilization. By then there were so many of them that to keep them all in their natural habitat required a vast reserve. It really wasn't all that hard to get the citizens of this area to evacuate. Nobody wanted to be anywhere near Manhattan, Kansas. So once again, *Homo neanderthalensis* has a plot of ground here on Earth. *Homo neanderthalensis*, the most intelligent toolmaking

species ever to evolve naturally."

"But how could the counteragent cause us to revert to an earlier stage of evolution?" I asked.

"You weren't listening," said Father.

I thought for a moment. "*Homo neanderthalensis* isn't an earlier stage," I said. "There was no more evolution after that."

"Only a disease," said Father.

It seemed too incredible to me, as an eleven-year-old who prided himself on understanding the world. "Human intelligence is an *infection*?"

"Passed from mother to child through the ovum," said Mother. "By a disease agent that alters the DNA in order to replicate itself. We should have realized it from the fact that in utero development recapitulates evolution, but there is no

stage in which the fetus passes through a habiline form. We did not evolve past it. The DNA is hijacked and we are born prematurely, grossly deformed by the disease. Neotenic, erect-standing, language-mad, lacking in sense of

smell, too feeble to survive on our own even as adults, in need of clothing and shelter and community to a degree that the Neanderthals never were. But ... smart."

"So now," said Father, "do you understand why medical science has to rely on inoculation to fight off cancer, so that a small percentage—far smaller than ever before in human history, but not zero—a small percentage dies? Elizio died because the only alternative we've found is for this race of perfectly healthy, immortal, dim-witted beings to inherit the Earth."

I stood there for a long time in silence, watching the Neanderthals, trying to see how their behavior was different from ours. In the years since then, I have come to realize that there was no important difference. Being smarter hasn't made us *act* any differently from the Neanderthals. We make better tools. We have a longer, more thorough collective memory in the form of libraries. We can talk much more fluently about the things we do. But we still do basically the same things. We *are* Neanderthals, at heart.

But I did not understand this at the time. I was, after all, only eleven. I had a much more practical—and heartless—question.

"Why do we keep this park at all?" I asked. "I mean, they're going to live forever. And all the time they're alive, they pose a danger of this counterinfection getting loose outside the fence. Why haven't they all been killed and their bodies nuked or something so that the counteragent is eliminated?"

Mother looked appalled at my ruthlessness, but Father only patted her arm and said, "Of course he thought of that, my love."

"But so young, to be so—"

"Practical?" prompted Father. "There was a long debate over exactly this issue, and it resurfaced from time to time, though not for decades now. The ones who argued for keeping the park talked about the necessity of studying our ancestors, and some people talked about the rights of these citizens who, after all, can't help their medical condition and have committed no crime, but it was all a smoke screen. The real reason we

didn't destroy them all, as you suggested, was because we didn't have the heart."

"They were our children," said Mother, crying again.

"At first," said Father. "And later, when they weren't children anymore, we still couldn't kill them. Because they had become our ancient parents."

Now, though, I have come to think that while they were both right, the answer is even deeper. We didn't kill them, and we continue not to kill them, despite the reality of all those dangers, because they are not "they" at all. There, but for the fact that we happen to be the tiniest bit ill, go we.

I had troubling dreams for months afterward. I had mood swings, alternating between aggression and despair. At times, my parents wished they had just answered my questions about Elizio by taking me to the priest and getting me on the roster of altar boys.

But they were not wrong to take me there, any more than they had been wrong *not* to tell me up till then. I needed to know before my education was complete. Those who do not know, who continue through adulthood oblivious, in a sense remain children, forever naive. Within the fence of the North American Wild Animal Park is the Garden of Eden, and the people there eat freely of the Tree of Life. Here, outside, in this world of thorns, we dwell in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, madly eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as much of it as we can get before we die.

You cannot straddle the boundary. If you bring children into the world on this side of the fence, you must take them to eat the fruit of the tree—not too young, not before they're able to bear it. But don't wait too long, either. Let them see, before you die, that death is truly the gift of a merciful God. ☹



about the author

Orson Scott Card is a six-time Hugo and Nebula award winner, and was honored with both awards in consecutive years for his novels Ender's Game and Speaker for the Dead—an accomplishment that remains unmatched.

Perhaps his most innovative work is his five-book fantasy series The Tales of Alvin Maker, which is set in a magical version of the American frontier. His latest novel, Enchantment, was published this spring by Del Rey.

about the illustrator

Brad Holland is self-taught, and has been a professional artist since the age of seventeen. His work has appeared in Playboy, and on the covers of The New Yorker, Time, Newsweek, The Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times Magazine, Graphis, and U.S. News & World Report. Holland's drawings and paintings have been exhibited around the world, including the Louvre and the U.S. Library of Congress. He has been awarded gold medals from the Art Director's Club of New York, the Society of Publication Designers, and the Society of Illustrators, receiving more gold medals than any other artist in that organization's history.



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Ad Index

ADVERTISER	PAGE
AMAZING® Stories	17
Bandai	7
Bridge Publications.....	IBC
Double Helix (Simon & Schuster Interactive).....	OBC
DRAGON® Magazine.....	15
DUNGEON® Adventures	19
GEN CON® Game Fair (Wizards of the Coast).....	9
Homeworld (Sierra)	IFC-1
Pioneer.....	2
STAR•DRIVE® Novels (Wizards of the Coast).....	5
Torment (Interplay).....	80-81
Wizards of the Coast Player's Guide	85

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Safe, but trapped, their only way out was a path that began in the mind and continued until they could hear . . .

A WHISPER OF CALADAN SEAS

BY BRIAN HERBERT
AND KEVIN J. ANDERSON

Arrakis, in the year 10,191 of the Imperial calendar. Arrakis . . . forever known as Dune. . .

THE CAVE IN THE MASSIVE SHIELD WALL WAS DARK and dry, sealed by an avalanche. The air tasted like rock dust. The surviving Atreides soldiers huddled in blackness to conserve energy, letting their glow-globe powerpacks recycle.

Outside, the Harkonnen shelling hammered against the bolt-hole where they had fled for safety. Artillery? What a surprise to be attacked by such seemingly obsolete technology . . . and yet, it was effective. *Damned effective.*

In pockets of silence that lasted only seconds, the young recruit Elto Vitt lay in pain listening to the wheezing of wounded, terrified men. The stale, oppressive air pressed heavily on him, increasing the broken-glass agony in his lungs. He tasted blood in his mouth, an unwelcome moisture in the absolute dryness.

His uncle, Sergeant Hoh Vitt, had not honestly told him how severe his injuries were, emphasizing Elto's "youthful resilience and stamina." Elto suspected he must be dying, and he wasn't alone in that predicament. These last soldiers were all dying, if not from their injuries, then from hunger or thirst.

Thirst.

A man's voice cut the darkness, a gunner named Deegan. "I wonder if Duke Leto got away. I hope he's safe."

A reassuring grunt. "Thufir Hawat would slit his own throat before he'd let the Baron touch our Duke, or young Paul." It was the signalman Scovich, fiddling with the flexible hip cages that held two captive distrans bats, creatures whose nervous systems could carry message imprints.

"Bloody Harkonnens!" Then Deegan's sigh became a sob. "I wish we were back home on Caladan."

I L L U S T R A T I O N B Y M A R K Z U G





Supply Sergeant Vitt was no more than a disembodied voice in the darkness, comfortingly close to his injured young nephew. “Do *you* hear a whisper of Caladan seas, Elto? Do you hear the waves, the tides?”

The boy concentrated hard. Indeed, the relentless artillery shelling sounded like the booming of breakers against the glistening black rocks below the cliff-perch of Castle Caladan.

“Maybe,” he said. But he didn’t, not really. The similarity was only slight, and his uncle, a Master Jongleur—a storyteller extraordinaire—wasn’t up to his capabilities, though here he couldn’t have asked for a more attentive audience. Instead the sergeant seemed stunned by events, and uncharacteristically quiet, not his usual gregarious self.

Elto remembered running barefoot along the beaches on Caladan, the Atreides home planet far, far from this barren repository of dunes, sandworms, and precious spice. As a child, he had tiptoed in the foamy residue of waves, avoiding the tiny pincers of crabfish so numerous that he could net enough for a fine meal in only a few minutes.

Those memories were much more vivid than what had just happened. . . .

THE ALARMS HAD RUNG in the middle of the night, ironically during the first deep sleep Elto Vitt had managed in the Atreides barracks at Arrakeen. Only a month earlier, he and other recruits had been assigned to this desolate planet, saying their farewells to lush Caladan. Duke Leto Atreides had received the governorship of Arrakis, the only known source of the precious spice melange, as a boon from the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV.

To many of the loyal Atreides soldiers, it had seemed a great financial coup—they had known nothing of politics . . . or of danger. Apparently Duke Leto had not been fully aware of the peril here either, because he’d brought along his concubine Lady Jessica and their fifteen-year-old son Paul.

Explosions sounded outside, shaking the barracks and rattling armor-plaz windows. Enemy assault thopters swooped in over the Shield Wall, probably coming from a Harkonnen base in the city of Carthage.

“Prepare your weapons!” Halleck bellowed. The buzzing of lasguns played across the stone walls of Arrakeen, incinerating buildings. Orange eruptions shattered plaz windows, decapitated observation towers. “We must defend House Atreides.”

“For the Duke!” Uncle Hoh cried.

Elto yanked on the sleeve of his black uniform, tugging the trim into place, adjusting the red Atreides hawk crest and red cap of the corps. Everyone else had already jammed feet into boots, slapped charge packs into lasgun rifles. Elto scrambled to catch up, his mind awl. His uncle had pulled strings to get him assigned here as part of the elite corps. The other men were lean and whipcord strong, the finest hand-picked Atreides troops. He didn’t *belong* with them.

Young Elto had been excited to leave Caladan for Arrakis, so far away. He had never ridden on a Guild Heighliner before, had never been close to a mutated Navigator who could fold space with his mind. Before leaving his ocean home, Elto had spent only a few months watching the men train, eating with them, sleeping in the barracks, listening to their colorful, bawdy tales of great battles past and duties performed in the service of the Atreides dukes.

Elto had never felt in danger on Caladan, but after only a short time on Arrakis, all the men had grown grim and uneasy. There had been unsettling rumors and suspicious events. Earlier that night, as the troops had bunked down, they had been agitated, but unwilling to speak of it, either because of their commander’s sharp orders or because the soldiers didn’t know enough details. Or maybe they were just giving Elto, the untried and unproven new comrade, a cold shoulder. . . .

Because of the circumstances of his recruitment, a few men of the elite corps hadn’t taken to Elto. Instead, they’d openly grum-



had never felt in danger on Caladan, but after only a short time on Arrakis, all the men had grown grim and uneasy.

When the warning bells shrieked, Elto snapped awake and rolled from his bunk bed. His uncle Hoh Vitt, already in full sergeant’s regalia, shouted for everyone to hurry, *hurry!* The Atreides house guard grabbed their uniforms, kits, and weapons. Elto recalled allowing himself a groan, annoyed at another apparent drill . . . and yet hoping it was only that.

The burly, disfigured weapons master Gurney Halleck burst into the barracks, his voice booming commands. He was flushed with anger, and the beet-colored inkvine scar on his face stood out like a lightning bolt. “House shields are down! We’re vulnerable!” Security teams had supposedly rooted out all the booby traps, spy-eyes, and assassination devices left behind by the hated Harkonnen predecessors. Now the lumpish Halleck became a frenzy of barked orders.

bled about his amateur skills, wondering why Duke Leto had permitted such a novice to join them. A signalman and communications specialist named Forrie Scovich, pretending to be friendly, had filled the boy with false information as an ill-conceived joke. Uncle Hoh had put a stop to that, for with his Jongleur’s talent for the quick, whispered story—always told without witnesses because of the ancient prohibition—he could have given any of the men terrible nightmares for weeks . . . and they all knew it.

The men in the Atreides elite corps feared and respected their supply sergeant, but even the most accommodating of them gave his nephew no preferential treatment. Anyone could see that young Elto Vitt was not one of them, not one of their rough-and-tumble, hard-fighting breed. . . .

By the time the Atreides house guard rushed out of the barracks, they were naked to aerial attack without house shields. The men knew the vulnerability couldn't possibly be from a mere equipment failure, not after what they'd been hearing, what they'd been feeling. How could Duke Leto Atreides, with all of his proven abilities, have permitted this to happen?

Enraged, Gurney Halleck grumbled loudly, "Aye, we have a traitor in our midst."

Illuminated in floodlights, Harkonnen troops in blue uniforms swarmed over the compound. More enemy transports disgorged assault teams.

Elto held his lasgun rifle, trying to remember the drills and training sessions. Someday, if he survived, his uncle would compose a vivid story about this battle, conjuring up images of smoke, sounds, and fires, as well as Atreides valor and loyalty to the Duke.

Atreides soldiers raced through the streets, dodging explosions, fighting hard to defend. Lasguns sliced vivid blue arcs across the night. The elite corps joined the fray, howling—but Elto could already see they were vastly outnumbered by this massive surprise assault. Without shields, Arrakeen had already been struck a mortal blow.

ELTO BLINKED HIS EYES IN THE CAVE, and saw light. A flicker of hope dissipated as he realized it was only a recharged glowglobe floating in the air over his head. Not daylight.

Still trapped in their tomb of rock, the Atreides soldiers listened to the continued thuds of artillery. Dust and debris trickled from the shuddering ceiling. Elto tried to keep his spirits high, but knew House Atreides must have fallen by now.

His uncle sat nearby, staring into space. A long red scratch jagged across one cheek.

During brief inspection drills while settling in, Elto had met the other important men in Duke Leto's security staff besides Gurney Halleck, especially the renowned Swordmaster Duncan Idaho and the old Mentat assassin Thufir Hawat. The black-haired Duke inspired such loyalty in his men, exuded such supreme confidence, that Elto had never imagined this mighty man could fall.

One of the security experts had been trapped here with the rest of the detachment. Now Scovich confronted him, his voice gruff and challenging. "How did the house shields get shut off? It must have been a traitor, someone you overlooked." The distrustful bats seemed agitated in their cages at Scovich's waist.

"We spared no effort checking the palace," the man said, more tired than defensive. "There were dozens of traps, mechanical and human. When the hunter-seeker almost killed Master Paul, Thufir Hawat offered his resignation, but the Duke refused to accept it."

"Well, you didn't find all the traps," Scovich grouched, probing for an excuse to fight. "You were supposed to keep the Harkonnens out."

Sergeant Hoh Vitt stepped between the two men before they could come to blows. "We can't afford to be at each other's throats. We need to work together to get out of this."

But Elto saw on the faces of the men that they all knew otherwise: They would never escape this death trap.

The unit's muscular battlefield engineer, Avram Fultz, paced

about in the faint light, using a jury-rigged instrument to measure the thickness of rock and dirt around them. "Three meters of solid stone." He turned toward the fallen boulders that had covered the cave entrance. "Down to two and a half here, but it's dangerously unstable."

"If we went out the front, we'd run headlong into Harkonnen shelling anyway," the gunner Deegan said. His voice trembled with tension, like a too-tight baliset string about to break.

Uncle Hoh activated a second glowglobe, which floated in the air behind him as he went to a bend in the tunnel. "If I remember the arrangement of the tunnels, on the other side of this wall there's a supply cache. Food, medical supplies . . . water."

Fultz ran his scanner over the thick stone. Elto, unable to move on his makeshift bed and fuzzed with painkillers, stared at the process, realizing how much it reminded him of Caladan fishermen using depth sounders in the reef fishing grounds.

"You picked a good, secure spot for those supplies, Sergeant," Fultz said. "Four meters of rock. The cave-ins have cut us off."

Deegan, his voice edged with hysteria, groaned. "That food and water might as well be in the Imperial Palace on Kaitain. This place . . . Arrakis . . . isn't right for us Atreides!"

The gunner was right, Elto thought. Atreides soldiers were tough, but like fish out of water in this hostile environment.

"I was never comfortable here," Deegan wailed.

"So who asked you to be *comfortable*?" Fultz snapped, setting aside his apparatus. "You're a soldier, not a pampered prince."

Deegan's raw emotions turned his words into a rant. "I wish the Duke had never accepted Shaddam's offer to come here. He must have known it was a trap! We can never live in a place like this!" He stood up, making exaggerated, scarecrowish gestures.

"We need water, the ocean," Elto said, overcoming pain to lift his voice. "Does anybody else remember *rain*?"

"I do," Deegan said, his voice a pitiful whine.

Elto thought of his first view of the sweeping wastelands of open desert beyond the Shield Wall. His initial impression had been nostalgic, already homesick. The undulating panorama of sand dunes had been so similar to the even patterns of waves on the sea . . . but without any drop of water.

Issuing a strange cry, Deegan rushed to the nearest wall and clawed at the stone, kicking and trying to dig his way out with bare hands. He tore his nails and pounded with his fists, leaving bloody patterns on the unforgiving rock, until two of the other soldiers dragged him away and wrestled him to the ground. One man, a hand-to-hand combat specialist who had trained at the famous Swordmaster School on Ginaz, ripped open one of their remaining medpaks and dosed Deegan with a strong sedative.

The pounding artillery continued. *Won't they ever stop?* He felt an odd, pain-wracked sensation that he might be sealed in this hellhole for eternity, trapped in a blip of time from which there was no escape. Then he heard his uncle's voice. . . .

Kneeling beside the claustrophobic gunner, Uncle Hoh leaned close, whispering, "Listen. Let me tell you a story." It was a private tale intended only for Deegan's ears, though the intensity in the Jongleur's voice seemed to shimmer in the thick air. Elto caught a few words about a sleeping princess, a hidden and magical city, a lost hero from the Butlerian Jihad who would slumber in oblivion until he rose again to save the Imperium. By the time Hoh Vitt completed his tale, Deegan had fallen into a stupor.

Elto suspected what his uncle had done, that he had disregarded the ancient prohibition against using the powers of planet Jongleur, ancestral home of the Vitt family. In the low light their gazes met, and Uncle Hoh's eyes were bright and fearful. As he'd been conditioned to do since childhood, Elto tried not to think about it, for he too was a Vitt.

Instead, he visualized the events that had occurred only hours before. . . .

ON THE STREETS OF ARRAKEEN, some of the Harkonnen soldiers had been fighting in an odd manner. The Atreides elite corps had shouldered lasguns to lay down suppressing fire. The buzzing weapons had filled the air with crackling power, contrasted with much more primal noises of screams and the percussive explosions of old-fashioned artillery fire.

The battle-scarred weapons master ran at the vanguard, bellowing in a strong voice that was rich and accustomed to command. "Watch yourselves—and don't underestimate *them*." Halleck lowered his voice, growling; Elto wouldn't have heard the words if he hadn't been running close to the commander. "They're in formations like Sardaukar."

Elto shuddered at the thought of the Emperor's crack terror troops, said to be invincible. *Have the Harkonnens learned Sardaukar methods?* It was confusing.

Sergeant Hoh Vitt grabbed his nephew's shoulder and turned him to join another running detachment. Everyone seemed more astonished by the unexpected and primitive mortar bombardment than by the strafing attacks of the assault 'thopters.

"Why would they use artillery, Uncle?" Elto shouted. He still hadn't fired a single shot from his lasgun. "Those weapons haven't been used effectively for centuries." Though the young recruit might not be well practiced in battle maneuvers, he had at least read his military history.

"Harkonnen devils," Hoh Vitt said. "Always scheming, always coming up with some trick. Damn them!"

One entire wing of the Arrakeen palace glowed orange, consumed by inner flames. Elto hoped the Atreides family had gotten away . . . Duke Leto, Lady Jessica, young Paul. He could still see their faces, their proud but not unkind manners; he could still hear their voices.

As the street battle continued, blue-uniformed Harkonnen invaders ran across an intersection, and Halleck's men roared in challenge. Impulsively, Elto fired his own weapon at the massed enemies, and the air shimmered with a crisscross web of blue-white lines. He fumbled, firing the lasgun again.

Scovich snapped at him. "Point that damn thing away from me! You're supposed to hit *Harkonnens*!" Without a word, Uncle Hoh grasped Elto's rifle, placed the young man's hands in the proper positions, reset the calibration, then slapped him on the back. Elto fired again, and hit a blue-uniformed invader.

Agonized cries of injured men throbbed around him, mingled with frantic calls of medics and squad leaders. Above it all, the weapons master yelled orders and curses through twisted lips. Gurney Halleck already looked defeated, as if he had personally betrayed his Duke. He had escaped from a Harkonnen slave pit years before, had lived with smugglers on Salusa Secundus, and had sworn revenge on his enemies. Now, though, the troubador warrior could not salvage the situation.

Under attack, Halleck waved his hands to command the entire detachment. "Sergeant Vitt, take men into the Shield Wall tunnels and guard our supply storehouses. Secure defensive positions, and lay down a suppressing fire to take out those artillery weapons."

Never doubting that his orders would be obeyed, Halleck turned to the remainder of his elite corps, reassessing the strategic situation. Elto saw that the weapons master had picked his best fighters to remain with him. In his heart, Elto had known at that moment, as he did now thinking back on it, that if this were ever to be told as one of his uncle's vivid stories, the tale would be cast as a tragedy.

In the heat of battle, Sergeant Hoh Vitt had shouted for them to trot double-time up the cliffside road. His detachment had taken their weapons and left the walls of Arrakeen. Glowlamps and portable illuminators showed firefly chains of other civilian evacuees trying to find safety in the mountainous barrier.

Panting, refusing to slacken their pace, they had gained altitude, and Elto looked down on the burning garrison city. The Harkonnens wanted the desert planet back, and they wanted to eradicate House Atreides. The blood feud between the two noble families dated all the way back to the Butlerian Jihad.

Sergeant Vitt reached a camouflaged opening and entered his code to allow them access. Down below, the gunfire continued. An assault 'thopter swooped along the side of the mountain, sketching black streaks of slagged rock; Scovich, Fultz, and Deegan opened fire, but the 'thopter retreated—after marking their position.

As the rest of the detachment raced inside the caves, Elto took a moment at the threshold to note the nearest artillery weapons. He saw five of the huge, old-style guns pounding indiscriminately at Arrakeen—the Harkonnens didn't care how much damage they caused. Then two of the mighty barrels rotated to face the Shield Wall. Flames belched out, followed by far-off thunder, and explosive shells rained down upon the cave openings.

"Get inside!" Sergeant Vitt shouted. The others moved to obey, but Elto remained fixated. In a single stroke, a long line of fleeing civilians vanished from the cliffside paths, as if a cosmic artist with a giant paintbrush had decided to erase his work. The artillery guns continued to fire and fire, and soon centered on the position of the soldiers.

The range of Elto's full-power lasgun was at least as long as the conventional shells. He aimed and fired, pulsing out an unbroken stream but expecting little in the way of results. But the dissipating heat struck the old-fashioned explosives in the loaded artillery shells, and the ragged detonation ripped out the breech of the mammoth cannon.

He turned around, grinning, trying to shout his triumph to his uncle—then a shell from the second massive gun struck squarely above the entrance to the cave. The explosion knocked Elto farther into the tunnel as tons of rock showered down, striking him. The avalanche sent shock waves through an entire section of the Shield Wall. The whole contingent was sealed inside. . . .

AFTER DAYS IN THE TOMBLIKE CAVE, one of the glow-globes gave out and could not be recharged; the remaining two managed only a flickering light in the main room. Elto lay wounded, tended by the junior medic and his dwindling supplies of medicinals. Elto's pain had dulled from that of broken

glass to a cold, cold blackness that seemed easier to endure—but how he longed for a sip of water!

Uncle Hoh shared his concern, but was unable to do anything else for him.

Squatting on the stone floor off to his left, two sullen soldiers had used their fingertips to trace a grid in the dust; with light and dark stones they played a makeshift game of Go, a carryover from ancient Terra.

Everyone waited and waited—not for rescue, but for the serenity of death, for escape.

The shelling outside had finally stopped. Elto knew with a sick certainty that the Atreides had lost. Gurney Halleck and his elite corps would be dead by now, the Duke and his family either killed or captured; none of the loyal Atreides soldiers dared to hope that Leto or Paul or Jessica had escaped.

The signalman Scovich paced the perimeter, peering into darkened cracks and crumbling walls. Finally, after carefully imprinting a distress message into the voice patterns of his captive distrans bats, he released them. The small creatures circled the dusty enclosure, seeking a way out. Their high-pitched cries echoed from the porous stone as they searched for any tiny niche. After frantic flapping and swooping, at last the pair disappeared through a fissure in the ceiling.

"We'll see if this works," Scovich said. His voice held little optimism.

In a weak but valiant voice, Elto called his uncle nearer. Using most of his remaining strength, he propped himself on an elbow. "Tell me a story, about the good times we had on our fishing trips."

Hoh Vitt's eyes brightened, but for only a second before fear set in. He spoke slowly. "On Caladan. . . . Yes, the old days."

"Not so long ago, Uncle."

"Oh, but it seems like it."

"You're right," Elto said. He and Hoh Vitt had taken a coracle along the shore, past the lush pundi rice paddies and out into

space . . . the wrist-wrestling championship of the universe, between two dwarf sisters who were the finalists . . . a talking slig.

"No, no stories now, Elto," the sergeant said in a fearful voice. "Rest now."

"You're a Master Jongleur, aren't you? You always said so."

"I don't talk about that much." Hoh Vitt turned away.

His ancestral family had once been proud members of an ancient school of storytelling on the planet Jongleur. Men and women from that world used to be the primary troubadours of the Imperium; they traveled between royal Houses, telling stories and singing songs to entertain the great families. But House Jongleur fell into disgrace when a number of the itinerant storytellers were proven to be double agents in inter-House feuds, and no one trusted them any longer. When the nobles dropped their services, House Jongleur forfeited its status in the Landsraad, losing its fortunes. Guild Heighliners stopped going to their planet; the buildings and infrastructure, once highly advanced, fell into disrepair. Largely due to the Jongleurs' demise, many entertainment innovations were developed, including holo projections, filmbooks, and shigawire recorders.

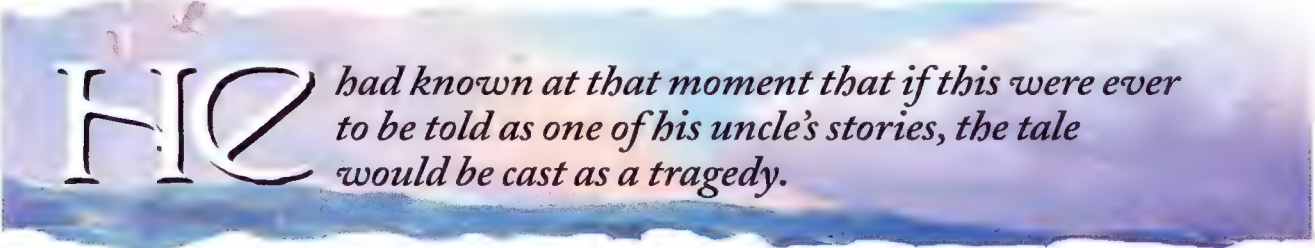
"Now is the time, Uncle. Take me back to Caladan. I don't want to be here."

"I can't do that, boy," he responded in a sad voice. "We're all stuck here."

"Make me *think* I'm there, like only you can do. I don't want to die in this hellish place."

With a piercing squeak, the two distrans bats returned. Confused and frustrated, they fluttered around the chamber while Scovich tried in vain to recapture them. Even they had been unable to escape.

Though the trapped men had held out little hope, the failure of the bats still made them groan in dismay. Uncle Hoh looked at them, then down at Elto as his expression hardened into grim determination.



H He had known at that moment that if this were ever to be told as one of his uncle's stories, the tale would be cast as a tragedy.

open water, beyond the seaweed colonies. They had spent days anchored in the foamy breakwaters of dark coral reefs, where they dove for shells, using small knives to pry free the flammable nodules called coral gems. In those magical waters they caught fan-fish—one of the great delicacies of the Imperium—and ate them raw.

"Caladan . . ." the gunner Deegan said groggily as he emerged from his stupor. "Remember how *vast* the ocean was? It seemed to cover the whole world."

Hoh Vitt had always been so good at telling stories, supernaturally good. He could make the most outrageous things real for his listeners. Friends or family made a game of throwing an idea at Hoh, and he would make up a story using it. Blood mixed with melange . . . a great Heighliner race across uncharted fold-

"Quiet! All of you." He knelt beside his injured nephew. Hoh's eyes became glazed with tears . . . or something more. "The boy needs to hear what I have to say."

ELTO LAY BACK, LETTING HIS EYES fall half closed as he readied himself for the words that would paint memory pictures on the insides of his eyelids. Sergeant Vitt sat rigid, taking deep breaths to compose himself, to center his uncanny skill and stoke the fires of imagination. To tell the type of story these men needed, a Master Jongleur must calm himself; he moved his hands and fingers in the ancient way, going through the motions he'd been taught by generations of storytellers, ritualistic preparations to make the story good and pure.

Fultz and Scovich shifted uneasily, and then moved closer,

anxious to listen as well. Hoh Vitt looked at them with glazed eyes, barely seeing them, but his voice carried a gruff warning. "There is danger."

"Danger?" Fultz laughed and raised his grimy hands to the dim ceiling and surrounding rock walls. "Tell us something we don't know."

"Very well." Hoh was deeply saddened, wishing he hadn't pulled strings to get Elto assigned to the prestigious corps. The young man still thought of himself as an outsider, but ironically—by staying in the line of fire and destroying one of the artillery weapons—he had shown more courage than any of the proven soldiers.

Now Hoh Vitt felt a tremendous sense of impending loss. This wonderful young man, filled not only with his own hopes and dreams but also with those of his parents and uncle, was going to die without ever achieving his bright promise. Hoh looked around, at the faces of the other soldiers, and seeing how they looked at him with such anticipation and admiration, he felt a moment of pride.

IN THE HINTERLANDS OF JONGLEUR, a hilly rural region where Hoh Vitt had grown up, dwelled a special type of storyteller. Even the natives suspected these "Master Jongleurs" of sorcery and dangerous ways. They could spin stories like deadly spiderwebs, and in order to protect their secrets, they allowed themselves to be shunned, hiding behind a cloak of mystique.

"Hurry, Uncle," Elto said, his voice quiet and thready.

With intensity in his words, Sergeant Vitt leaned closer. "You remember how my stories always start, don't you?" He touched the young man's pulse.

"You warn us not to believe too deeply, to always remember that it's only a story . . . or it could be dangerous. We could lose our minds."

"I'm saying that again to you, boy." He scanned the close-pressed faces around him. "And to everyone listening."

like the wispy smoke of a fire.

"You and your father went with me on weeklong fishing trips. Oh, those days! Up at sunrise and casting nets until sunset, with the golden tone of the sun framing each day. I must say we enjoyed our time alone on the water even more than the fish we caught. The companionship, the adventures and hilarious mishaps."

And hidden in his words were subliminal signals: *Smell the salt water, the iodine of drying seaweed. . . . Hear the whisper of waves, the splash of a distant fish too large to bring aboard whole.*

"At night, when we sat at anchor alone in the middle of the seaweed islands, we'd stay up late, the three of us, playing a fast game of tri-chess on a board made of flatpearls and abalone shells. The pieces themselves were carved from the translucent ivory tusks of South Caladan walruses. Do you remember?"

"Yes, Uncle. I remember."

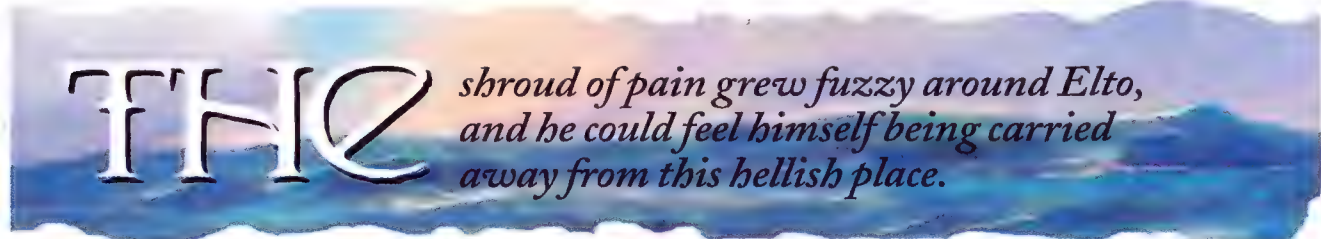
All the men murmured their agreement; the Jongleur's haunting words were as real to them as to the young man who had actually experienced the memories.

Listen to the hypnotic, throbbing songs of unseen murmons hiding in a fog bank that ripples across the calm waters.

The shroud of pain grew fuzzy around Elto, and he could feel himself going to that other place and time, being carried away from this hellish place. The parched, dusty air at first smelled dank, then cool and moist. As he closed his eyes, he could sense the loving touch of Caladan breezes on his cheek. He smelled the mists of his native world, spring rain on his face, sea waves lapping at his feet as he stood on the rocky beach below the Atreides castle.

"When you were young, you would splash in the water, laughing and swimming naked with your friends. Do you remember?"

"I . . ." And Elto felt his voice merge with the others, becoming one with them. "We remember," the men mumbled reverently. All around them the air had grown close and stifling, most of the oxygen used up. Another one of the glowglobes died. But the



THE shroud of pain grew fuzzy around Elto,
and he could feel himself being carried
away from this hellish place.

Scovich made a scoffing noise, but the others remained silent and intent. Perhaps they thought his warning was only part of the storytelling process, part of an illusion a Master Jongleur needed to create.

After a moment's hush, Hoh employed the enhanced memorization techniques of the Jongleurs, a method of transferring large amounts of information and retaining it for future generations. In this manner he brought to mind the planet Caladan, summoning it in every intricate detail.

"I used to have a wingboat," he said with a gentle smile, and then he began to describe sailing on the seas of Caladan. He used his voice like a paintbrush, selecting words carefully, like pigments precisely mixed by an artist. He spoke to Elto, but his story spread hypnotically, wrapping around the circle of listeners

men didn't know this. They were anesthetized from their pain.

See the wingboat cruising like a razorfin under dazzling sunlight, then through a warm squall under cloudy skies.

"I used to bodysurf in the waves," Elto said with a faint smile of wonder.

Fultz coughed, then added his own reminiscences. "I spent a summer on a small farm overlooking the sea, where we harvested paradan melons. Have you ever had one fresh out of the water? Sweetest fruit in the universe."

Even Deegan, still somewhat dazed from his stupor, leaned forward. "I saw an elecraan once, late at night and far away—oh, they're rare, but they do exist. It's more than just a sailor's story. Looked like an electrical storm on the water, but alive. Luckily, the monster never came close." Though the gunner had been

hysterical not long before, his words held such an awed solemnity that no one thought to disbelieve him.

Swim through the water, feel its caress on your body. Imagine being totally wet, immersed in the sea. The waves surround you, holding and protecting you like a mother's arms. . . .

The two distrans bats, still loose from the signalman's cages, had clung to the ceiling for hours, but now they swayed and dropped to the floor. All the air was disappearing in their tomb.

Elto remembered the old days in Cala City, the stories his uncle used to tell to an entranced audience of his family. At several points in each of those tales, Uncle Hoh would force himself to break away. He had always taken great care to remind his listeners that it was *only a story*.

This time, however, Hoh Vitt took no breaks.

Realizing this, Elto felt a moment of fear, like a dreamer unable to awaken from a nightmare. But then he allowed himself to succumb. Though he could barely breathe, he forced himself to say, "I'm going into the water. . . . I'm diving. . . . I'm going deeper. . . ."

Then all the trapped soldiers could hear the waves, smell the water, and remember the whisper of Caladan seas. . . .

The whisper became a roar.

IN THE VELVET SHADOWS OF A crisp night on Dune, Fremen scavengers dropped over the ridge of the Shield Wall into the rubble. Stillsuits softened their silhouettes, allowing them to vanish like beetles into crevices.

Below, most of the fires in Arrakeen had been put out, but the damage remained untended. The new Harkonnen rulers had returned to their traditional seat of government in Carthage; they would leave the scarred Atrides city as a blackened wound for a few months . . . as a reminder to the people.

The feud between House Atrides and House Harkonnen meant nothing to the Fremen—the noble families were all unwelcome interlopers on their sacred desert planet, which the Fremen had claimed as their own thousands of years earlier, after the Wandering. For millennia these people had carried the wisdom of their ancestors, including an ancient Terran saying about each cloud having a silver lining. The Fremen would use the bloodshed of these royal houses to their own advantage: The deathstills back at the sietch would drink deeply from the casualties of war.

Harkonnen patrols swept the area, but the soldiers cared little for the bands of furtive Fremen, pursuing and killing them only out of sport rather than in a focused program of genocide. The Harkonnens paid no heed to the Atrides trapped in the Shield Wall either, thinking none of them could have survived; so they left the bodies trapped in the rubble.

From the Fremen perspective, the Harkonnens did not value their resources. Many water rings would be earned for the moisture recovered from these battle casualties, making these Fremen scavengers wealthy.

Working together, using bare callused hands and metal digging tools, the scavengers began their excavation, opening a narrow tunnel between the rocks. Only a few dim glowglobes hovered close to the diggers, providing faint light.

Through soundings and careful observations on the night of the attack, the Fremen knew where the victims would be. They

had uncovered a dozen already, as well as a precious cache of supplies, but now they were after something much more valuable—the tomb of an entire detachment of Atrides soldiers. The desert men toiled for hours, sweating into the absorbent layers of their stillsuits, taking only a few sipped drops of recovered moisture.

When they broke into the cave enclosure, though, they stepped into a clammy stone coffin filled with the redolence of death. Some of the Fremen cried out or muttered superstitious prayers to Shai-Hulud, but others probed forward, increasing the light from the glowglobes now that they were out of sight of the nighttime patrols.

The Atrides soldiers all lay dead together, as if struck down in a strange suicide ceremony. One man sat in the center of their group, and when the Fremen leader moved him, his body fell to one side and a gush of water spewed out of his mouth. The Fremen tasted it. Salt water.

The scavengers backed away, even more frightened now.

Carefully, two young men inspected the bodies, finding that the uniforms of the Atrides were warm and wet, stinking of mildew and damp rot. Their dead eyes were open wide and staring, but with contentment instead of the expected horror, as if they had shared a religious experience. All of the dead Atrides soldiers had clammy skin . . . and something even more peculiar, revealed when the Fremen cut them open.

The lungs of these dead men were entirely filled with water.

The Fremen fled, leaving their spoils behind, and resealed the cave. Thereafter, it became a forbidden place of legend, drawing wonder from anyone hearing the story as it was passed on by Fremen from generation to generation.

Somehow, sealed inside a lightless cave in the driest desert, all of the Atrides soldiers had *drowned*. . . .

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about the authors

Brian Herbert, the son of Frank Herbert, is the author of many acclaimed science fiction novels, including *Sidney's Comet*; *Sudanna, Sudanna*; *Prisoners of Arion*; *The Race for God*; and *Man of Two Worlds* (written with his father).

His journal detailing family events has become the foundation for Brian's comprehensive biography of his father's life.



Kevin J. Anderson knew he wanted to write fiction by the age of five, when he watched the classic movie *War of the Worlds* on television. At age eight, he wrote his first novel, a three-page thriller about a mad scientist. And at the ripe old age of ten, he took his hard-earned grass mowing and odd-job money to the store. He needed a bicycle. He bought a typewriter.

Kevin is married to author and frequent co-author Rebecca Moesta. An avid hiker, he does much of his writing with the use of a hand-held tape recorder while on long nature walks.

about the illustrator

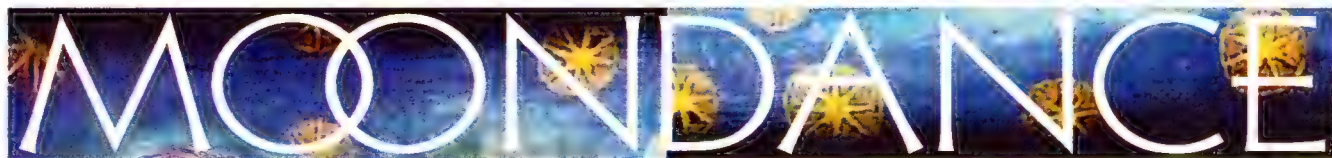
Mark Zug dropped out of art school to learn how to paint. Later he deserted his machinist post to illustrate Harlan Ellison's *I, Robot*. He now lives in hiding and loves his job.



*Break down the age barrier, get past the
appearance issue, and what's left?
All that really matters is just the way you are.*

J

ERRY NOONAN NOTICED the damage to his robot immediately at the start of the shift. In his RC rig at home in New Jersey, he raised and lowered his arm, but on the Moon the corresponding manipulator flopped about uselessly. It also hurt like hell, and he had to turn down the feedback circuit until the arm felt nearly dead.



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Some sort of accident had left its metal skin deformed, and the servo motors were responding erratically. The bastard on the previous shift had messed him up good.

The job of raising and joining the huge cables that would support the dome over the Huygens crater was grueling work, and Jerry was damn well not going to work an entire shift with a bum manipulator arm. He radioed the problem in to his unit chief and was given permission to take his robot over to the repair shop. Better to spend a few hours in the shop getting a new arm than struggling with the thing for a whole shift. Damage among the robots was not uncommon in a job like the doming of Huygens crater, and Jerry had been to the repair shop a few times before, but this time he met Audrey.

"Aww, did the big burly cable-hauler hurt his poor little paw?" a feminine voice from the inverted funnel-shaped repair robot spoke into his earpiece.

Swell, Jerry thought. A lady robot mechanic.

"It was like this when my shift started," he said.

The repair mech circled once around Jerry's barrel-shaped body, looking over the damage before cradling his broken manipulator in its own metal arms. Jerry could not tell how many legs this mech had under the round bumper "skirt" of its body, but he noticed how the mech wiggled from side to side as it moved, a most unusual gait for a robot. It was an incongruously feminine walk.

"Wow, you really did a number on this arm," the mech said.

"I said I didn't do it," he responded. Even though she

handled his manipulator gently, Jerry pulled away sharply, as if he were hurt. With the transmission lag, his robot did not mirror the move for another second and a quarter, but all the lunar robot operators were used to dealing with the time delay. "The operator before me left it like this. If I could work around it, I'd leave it like it is, so the bastard would have to deal with it on his own shift."

The mech moved forward to scoop up the broken manipulator again, this time a bit more forcefully, making Jerry wince with pain back home in his RC unit.

"Hey, I just fix them," the mech said. "Nothing personal, okay, buddy?"

"Jerry. My name is Jerry Noonan."

"Pleased to meet you, Jerry Noonan. I'm Audrey."

"Audrey. You know, we don't get too many female operators up here on the Moon."

Audrey chuckled and said, "And at these prices you won't get too many more."

"Huh?" Jerry mumbled.

"You know, the old bar joke about the talking kangaroo."

"A joke? I'm sorry, I don't get out too much anymore. Not to bars, anyway."

"Too bad. Bars can sometimes be . . . useful," Audrey said as she attached a wire harness into the test socket of his damaged arm. She walked her robot over to a console on the other side of the room, again bouncing and swaying in her unusual fashion.

"You walk funny for a robot," Jerry said.

"Funny?"

I L L U S T R A T I O N B Y T H O M A N G



"Not funny ha-ha. Just different for a robot. It's kind of a girlish walk."

"Hmmm. Being a woman, I suppose I can live with that. You better turn down the sensitivity on that arm now, or this might hurt a bit."

Jerry just barely felt a jolt of power surge through the manipulator before he turned off the feedback. Without him controlling it, the arm began flailing up and down under the mechanic's overriding commands.

"That didn't come out right," Jerry said. "I *like* the way you walk. It's very feminine, if a pointy metal cylinder can be feminine. Do you move like that on purpose, or is it just the way you walk naturally?"

"Hmmm. I've never thought about it too much, so I suppose it's natural. Probably something carried over from my dancing."

"You're a dancer?"

"Not a ballet dancer or anything like that," Audrey said, bouncing back over to Jerry's side. "Just some social dancing on the weekends. Jerry, this arm is shot. I'll just replace the whole thing, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever it needs. Do young people still go out dancing much these days? It's been so long since I've been out, but I used to go dancing before—" Jerry was about to say, "Before I was married," but just then she popped off the faulty manipulator, and he fell silent as he gaped into the empty socket where his arm had been.

Audrey shimmied over to an equipment locker and unpacked a replacement manipulator. "All kinds of people go out dancing," she said from across the room. "Not just young people. It's a very human thing to do."

"I don't know," Jerry said. "I guess it was fun when I was the right age for it, but you get older and settle down."

"I certainly hope not," Audrey answered. "It's when you stop doing young things that you start getting old."

"Hmm. Maybe you're right, but I just don't feel like going out much anymore."

"Come on. You don't sound so old to me."

"How old do you think I am?"

"You sound too young to be sitting at home. What are you, thirty-five? Forty?"

Back home in his RC rig, Jerry smiled. He was fifty-three and feeling ten years older. In his younger days, he had not been unattractive, but he had developed a paunch from so many years of inactivity, and the few hairs on his head that hadn't fallen out yet were decidedly gray.

"Yeah," he lied. "Forty. What are you, late twenties or so?"

"You know you're never supposed to ask a lady that question."

"Yeah, I suppose. Sorry."

"But if it's any help, the manufacturing sticker on my chassis says I was made in 2038."

"Very funny."

"So why aren't you laughing? Lighten up, McGraw."

Jerry fell silent as Audrey quickly installed the new arm and tested it with her instruments. Perhaps he was being an old stick in the mud, but this was, after all, the workplace. Jerry goosed up the feedback a bit while she still cradled the new arm, and he imagined a flesh-and-blood person holding his arm, instead of the cold titanium and carbon fibers.

"Where are you working from, Audrey?" he asked.

Audrey lifted his arm carefully, checking her instrument readings, then gently lowered it to his side. "Me?" she said. "New Jersey."

"You're from Jersey? Me, too. What part?"

"Woodbridge."

"Woodbridge! I'm over in Edison. That's only a few miles away. How's that for a coincidence?"

"Well, the Huygens project recruited pretty heavily in central Jersey, so there's bound to be lots of us from the area here."

"Audrey, we're practically neighbors. Well, then, where is this place you go dancing? Maybe I know it."

"Mostly at the Candy Bar on Route Nine. It's across from the Pharmatex building."

"Yeah, I know it. I used to go there once in a while when I was a lot younger. I wonder if the place is still the same as I remember."

"There's one way to find out. Why don't you come around and check it out for yourself?"

"Well, maybe I will," Jerry said, although he couldn't realistically see himself entering a dance club at his age.

"Good. Perhaps I'll see you there, then," Audrey said.

"Umm . . . what nights do you go there, and how would I recognize you?"

"Oh, I'm there a lot. Fridays and Saturdays, mostly. If you come, I'll find you. I promise."

Jerry wanted to stay and talk a bit more, but the new arm was checked out and ready to go. His crew would be looking for him before too long.

"Audrey?"

"Yes?"

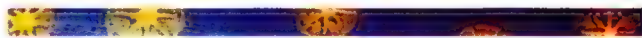
"Could you just walk around the room one more time for me? I think it's really cute how you make that robot move."

"Hmmm. Okay. How's this?"

Audrey sashayed with an exaggerated bump and grind to the middle of the room, her arms held out slightly on either side. She finished with a pirouette and then curtsied.

"Just beautiful. I can't wait to tell the guys about this—a robot with a sexy walk. Audrey, you're priceless."

"See you around, tall, dark, and shiny."



THE WEEKS went by at work, and one by one the big cables were hoisted into place along the crater's rim as the big spiderweb took shape. Each new workday was just like the last, and Jerry liked it that way. He had mentioned to his wife Dana that he had heard the Candy Bar was still a popular spot, but she just shrugged and said that dance clubs like that were for young people. Jerry grimly agreed and quietly went back to his rut.

One day a cable with a bad splice in it let go explosively as weight was being applied. The free end whipped around and brushed a couple of Jerry's robot legs, snapping them off like matchsticks. He still had four mechanical walker legs remaining, and while he was not stable enough for work duties, Jerry

was able to limp the robot over to the repair shop. The robot mechanic wiggled over in a familiar gait to greet him.

"Hey, robot 60148. Is that you in there, Jerry?"

"It's me, Audrey. Couple of missing legs this time."

"So I see. Well, that'll surely put a crimp in your dance step."

Jerry looked away guiltily. "Were you looking for me at the Candy Bar?"

Audrey went to the locker and retrieved a couple of leg units. Her robot glided back to Jerry smoothly, without the usual bouncing around, and she began installing the new legs.

"I was disappointed that you didn't show up at the club," she said, "but it's okay. I have lots of dance partners."

"I really did mean to come out there, but I just couldn't convince my . . . myself."

"So you chickened out. Happens to the best of them, I'm afraid."

"Audrey, if an older guy like me showed up at the Candy Bar, wouldn't people stare?"

"Maybe if you were a really bad dancer they would, but forty's not so old."

Audrey popped the two new legs into the empty sockets and began testing them.

"I, um, wasn't quite honest about that," Jerry said. "Actually, I'm closer to fifty."

"It still wouldn't matter. It's how young you feel that counts. You come to the club, and you'll be surprised."

"Are there many older people at the Candy Bar?"

"A few. Nobody thinks they're strange, and they seem to have a good time. Why are you fighting with yourself over this? Just come on out and see for yourself. Stop being so . . . old."

"I'm a little rusty, no pun intended. If I came to the club, would you dance with me?"

"Oh, Jerry, it's not a contest or anything. I'll dance with you right now if you'd like. Come on—your legs are all fixed."

"Here?"

"Number 60148, may I have this dance?"

"Um, how about some music?"

"Music? Sheesh. Hold on a sec."

Audrey's manipulators slumped, and the robot sank an inch or two onto its skirt. Jerry figured that Audrey must have slipped out of her rig back in New Jersey and her robot was unmanned. A few seconds later the mech came back to life, and music began playing in Jerry's headset.

"Audrey, what did you do?"

"I just patched my home audio rig into the headset and found a disc to set the mood. Sorry I can't seem to light any candles up here, though."

The music was a Billy Joel classic that was already an oldie back in Jerry's courting days. Dana and he had danced to this one for the last time at their wedding reception.

"Take my hands, silly," Audrey said, snapping him back to Huygens.

Jerry clumsily reached over and lightly took two of Audrey's manipulators in his. His sensors felt the cold alloy and polycarbonate resins, but he perceived a warmth, perhaps a false triggering of his robot's feedback circuits, as he put an arm around the top of Audrey's metal torso.

They moved together clumsily at first. With the transmission

lag, the robots were both a step behind the music, but Audrey bounced lightly to the beat and Jerry struggled not to crash into her. After a minute, he realized that they were moving well together, dancing around the repair shop, touching but not knocking into one another. She was skilled at following his shaky lead, anticipating his moves even with the time lag, and pulled him closer as they spun around the room.

"I'm not much of a dancer, am I?" Jerry said.

"These robots just aren't made for it, but you're doing fine," she whispered in his earpiece.

In a few short minutes, the music ended and the two of them stood there, looking at one another.

"This is too weird," Jerry said, breaking the mood. "I have to get back to my crew."

"See you at the Candy Bar this weekend?" she asked.

"Maybe. If I come, you'll really dance with me, right?"

"If my dance card's not all filled up."

Jerry wondered if that was really a joke. Perhaps she already had a steady partner. And if she was as attractive as her voice sounded, the young men were probably swarming all over her. It wasn't like he was seeking romance, since he loved his wife, but he was curious to see if he could still attract a pretty young thing, even if just for a dance. When she got a good look at him in the flesh, she might not be so interested.

"Well, thanks for the dance, but I have to get back now," he said.

As he walked toward the door, he heard her mutter, "Men!"



FRIDAY NIGHT after his shift, Jerry was feeling restless.

"What are you doing now?" Dana asked, after he had stood before his open closet door for a full five minutes.

"Just looking. Thinking."

"About clothes? Are you feeling all right?"

"I was thinking that if I wanted to go out to a place like the Candy Bar, would I have anything even remotely appropriate to wear? Most of these old things are hopelessly out of fashion now, and I probably couldn't fit into a lot of them anyway."

"Oh, no, you're not going to start in on that again, are you?" Dana said. "This is just one of those silly midlife crises where you're trying to recapture your youth, you know."

Jerry stuck his tongue out at her. "I asked if people our age ever go to the Candy Bar, and I heard that it was okay."

"You weren't expecting me to come along, were you?"

"No. Not really."

"Well, what were you thinking? You weren't planning on going out by yourself, were you?"

"Um, yes. That is, if you won't come along with me."

Dana just stared at Jerry silently, looking hurt. Then she pursed her lips, and Jerry knew she was gauging his sincerity. He hardened his face into a mask of resolve to let her know he was serious.

"Okay," Dana said, "why don't you wear something relatively

simple? Khaki slacks, a dress shirt. You can probably still get into the navy blazer if you don't button the front."

Jerry's jaw dropped. "You're letting me go? By *myself*?"

"Hell, no. This may be one of the stupidest things you've done in a long time, Jerry Noonan, but if you're determined to make a fool of yourself, I'm coming along to keep an eye on you."

Dana walked over to the other closet, opened it, and began making plans of her own.



JERRY ORDERED an autocab, which took them up the highway, past places that should have been familiar but weren't any longer. They just hadn't had a need to go into Woodbridge in the past twenty-five years, and much had changed. On the short ride, Jerry and Dana reminisced and pointed out to each other where long-gone places had been. The cab left the highway and slid up in front of the Candy Bar, which still looked vaguely familiar except for the gaudy new 3-D laser billboard in front. Jerry began to have second thoughts. He punched some commands into the autocab's console, paying extra to keep the cab on standby at the destination, just in case they wanted to make a hasty exit.

"Hey, look!" Jerry said, pointing. "They still have the old fountain out front."

The decorative fountain was a small, round pool over which flew several nude cherubs supported by water jets. The water was tinted a garish shade of blue, and colored lights made the gushing water look even more unnatural.

"Bad taste never seems to fall out of fashion," Dana said.

"Lighten up . . . McGraw," Jerry said. "It's still pretty much as I remember it, although I don't recall either of us thinking it was so ugly years ago."

"What did we know back then? We were just kids."

"We had fun, though, didn't we?" Jerry asked.

Dana smiled at him. "Come on, let's get this over with."

Jerry opened the door, and the two of them entered the Candy Bar. The interior was dark and crowded, and the sound system was pumping out the loud, fast "ozone" music that was currently in fashion. On the dance floor, Jerry saw a hundred young people of both sexes moving about in various strange dance styles. He got the idea that most of the people were dancing independently of partners, but as he continued watching, he noticed certain points in the music when the whole group seemed to move together in a few well-rehearsed steps.

"Seen enough?" Dana yelled in his ear to make herself heard over the din of the music.

"Just give it a chance!"

Jerry led her around the dance floor to a quieter spot, where they grabbed a free table. They ordered two glasses of wine from a waitress, and Jerry paid the outrageous price without comment.

"Jerry, this is not our crowd," Dana said. "And who can dance to this . . . noise?"

Jerry scanned the room carefully. It really wasn't their crowd, all right. The dancers were mostly in their twenties, with

maybe a few as old as their late thirties. Nobody on the dance floor was within ten years of them, he figured. At the far end of the bar, away from the dance floor, several booths held a few older people, couples and singles in their sixties perhaps. In another corner, overlooking the dance floor, a deejay booth was manned by a pimple-faced kid who couldn't have been any older than eighteen.

"Can we finish our drinks and just go home?" Dana asked. "I'm not very comfortable here."

"Let me see if I can find someone to say hello to."

"Who?"

"Someone from work. The one who told me about this place."

"What does he look like?"

Jerry almost corrected Dana's "he" to a "she," but thought better of it. "I don't know. We've only talked robot to robot."

"Then how will you recognize him?"

"I'll just know. A very distinctive way of walking."

"Well, go find him so we can get out of here."

"I'll see if I can spot him." Jerry looked over the group on the dance floor. Audrey had to be one of the better dancers, if she was here. While he sipped his wine, he watched them move sinuously about the floor. One woman in a green jumpsuit was particularly skilled, but it wasn't Audrey's rhythm. Several other women were also good at that style of dancing, but Jerry ruled out each one of them. There was nothing of Audrey that he recognized. It was hopeless, he finally decided.

"Do you want to try a dance?" Jerry said to Dana before he gulped the last of his wine.

"I don't think I can handle this music," she answered.

Jerry told Dana to sit tight. He went over to the deejay booth and talked to the pimple-faced kid. He returned smiling.

"The next song is ours," he told Dana.

"Oh, no, you didn't pay that boy anything, did you?"

"Just a little," he said, chuckling. "What's a few dollars once every twenty years or so?"

After a few minutes, the ozone song faded out and was replaced by a familiar melody: Billy Joel singing "Just the Way You Are." Dana's face lit up with recognition.

"Hey, I remember this one!" she said.

"Care to dance to it?"

"All right, why not?" she said, rising from her seat.

Most of the young people were streaming off the dance floor, sitting out the slow music, which left Jerry and Dana plenty of room. The remaining dancers, unfamiliar with the old song but unwilling to give up the floor, continued dancing the ozone steps, determined to wait out the strange music.

Jerry took Dana's hand and began to dance. Fearing that he'd steer into a collision with the gyrating dancers, he kept them moving about a small patch of the floor, away from the others. Jerry was careful not to step on Dana's toes, and they quickly fell into the rhythm. The young dancers gave them plenty of room, and several of them stopped moving long enough to watch the two of them dance in the old style.

"I'm beginning to feel really self-conscious," Dana said. "People are looking at us."

"Let 'em look," Jerry said, giddy with the wine and the moment. "Let's show them how civilized adults dance."

Dana and Jerry looked into each other's eyes, their feet moved, and the rest of the dancers in the room faded away.

The song was over too soon, and the pumping ozone beat took up again, but Jerry and Dana continued dancing at their own pace for a few seconds longer, ignoring the different tempo.

"Pretty good for an old-timer," Dana said.

"You're not too shabby yourself," Jerry responded.

The floor rapidly filled up with young people returning for the loud music. Jerry looked around the room as the crowd surrounded them. In the distance, he saw one of the older ladies in the shadows get up from her booth and begin making her way to the dance floor. Despite her obvious years, she walked with the gait of a much younger person, almost bouncing with each step. The young people all around her greeted her with obvious affection, slowing her progress.

Still dancing, Jerry watched the older woman cross the room. Was she looking his way? Yes, she was. The woman stopped at the edge of the dance floor, looked him straight in the eye, and lightly began clapping her frail hands. A few of the young people standing around her also looked at Jerry and Dana admiringly and began adding to the applause. The woman broke eye contact with Jerry and cast her gaze on Dana, the corners of her mouth curling up in a barely detectable smile. Jerry steered Dana around so that she was facing away from the woman and began to raise his hand to wave, but just then a man stepped out from behind her and she looked back toward him. He appeared to be in his late sixties, slightly stooped and with a poorly fitting jacket, but he moved spryly. When he spoke to the old woman, her slight smile broadened, and the pair of them stepped on the floor and began dancing. Not old-fashioned dancing, but the same slippery moves the young crowd was performing.

The applause got louder.

"Are those people clapping for us?" Dana said, noticing the group of young people at the edge of the floor. "Now I'm really feeling self-conscious."

"Nah, it's for the old couple," Jerry said, pointing.

"The old couple? I thought *we* were the old couple."

Dana looked over to where Jerry was pointing and saw the older couple for the first time.

"Oh," she said.

Dana and Jerry worked their way off the floor and watched the two older dancers mix it up with the young crowd, obviously enjoying themselves.

"Had enough now?" Dana asked.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said. "Let's go home, Dana."



A WEEK LATER, on the Moon, Jerry saw the plummeting tool kit in plenty of time to move his robot out of the way, but he stayed where he was, letting the falling metal box take out one of his purposely outstretched manipulator arms.

"Noonan, whassa matter with you?" the unit chief growled in his earpiece.

"I guess I wasn't paying attention," he responded.

"Get yourself over to the repair shop and get it fixed. Now!"

Jerry's robot didn't just walk across the crater—it danced.

"So, it's number 60148 again, is it?" Audrey said when he shuffled into the shop. "Jerry?"

"Yeah, it's me," Jerry said.

Audrey worked over the arm perfunctorily, quickly popping a new one in its place.

"You know," Jerry said, "I went to that club of yours last week and I was wondering if I might have seen you. You weren't . . . the lady in the green jumpsuit, were you?"

"Sorry, no. I, um, didn't make it out to the club last week. Something came up."

"Well, I had a pretty good time anyway."

"See, I told you so. Like I said, you're only as young as you feel. Who did you dance with?"

"Just somebody. Some pretty young thing I met at the bar."

"Hmmm. Any interest there?"

"Yeah, I think so. She's a great little dancer and I think we might make a good couple. Don't know if I'll be back at the Candy Bar though. Too noisy."

"Too bad for me," Audrey said, sighing. "But I hope it works out for you. I guess I won't get that dance you promised me now, huh?"

"We could dance here, if you'd like."

"Sure. Hold on while I put on some music."

Audrey's robot went dead for a minute, then came back online. As a saxophone played the introduction to the old familiar tune, the big steel barrel and the inverted titanium funnel came together and moved around the room in time. 🎵



about the author

Brian Plante is a transplanted New Yorker now living in North Carolina, where he unceasingly searches for good pizza, bagels, and Chinese food. He really wishes he could get used to grits, but it's just not happening.

Since winning an award in the Writers of the Future contest a few years back, his work has appeared with some regularity in Analog and Pirate Writings, as well as other magazines and anthologies.

Brian's wife does not read science fiction, and he is hoping that this appearance in AMAZING Stories goes a long way toward helping him convince her that he is, indeed, a serious writer.

about the illustrator

Thom Ang has illustrated for Twentieth Century Fox, Business Week, Sony Music, Jim Henson Productions, Honeywell, and numerous other clients. He is most renowned for the illustrations he has created for The X-Files (totaling over seventy paintings). In addition to illustrating, Thom has worked as a storyboard artist for Sony Animation and as an art director for Disney Interactive.

Since graduating from Art Center College of Design in 1992, he has won several awards; most recently, the Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles Award of Excellence, and Spectrum's Editorial Gold medal.

Thom hopes to one day understand why cats hate him.



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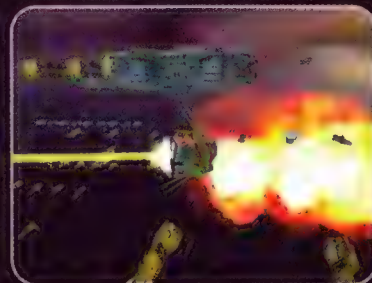
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Silver Screen

by James Louder

Big Screen, Little Screen

TELEVISION IS EVIL. That's one of the few consistent messages offered by science fiction, fantasy, and horror cinema—in fact, by movies of all sorts. From *Willie Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* to *Broadcast News* to *Videodrome*, film after film slams TV as an addictive menace controlled by panderers and snake oil salesmen.

Long before television became a viable competitor to film, Hollywood cast the technology as a B-movie menace. *Murder by Television*, with Bela Lugosi on his post-*Dracula* career slide, saw release in 1935, with Mary Astor finding herself *Trapped by Television* just a year later. In these low-budget murder mysteries, TV is more scenery than subject, but they foreshadow the clash that would occur between the two industries within a decade.

At the close of World War II, the government ended the

wartime freeze on the granting of new television station licenses. Between 1948 and 1952, the percentage of US homes with televisions grew from only four percent to more than thirty-four percent, the number of TV receivers from less than a million to ten million. To combat the box office threat, studios forbade the use of their talent and their films on television. But television could not be stopped. The days of the traditional Hollywood studio were numbered.

Knowing the roots of the conflict, it's still not quite clear why SF films in particular serve up such invariably harsh criticism of television.

After all, science fiction is such a tech-friendly

genre that even nuclear weapons get cast as saviors now and then. Not TV, though. The Tube is unredeemable.

Perhaps SF and fantasy filmmakers have more reasons than their peers to despise the medium. The general populace knows these genres largely through TV, and the perceptions it has created are far from complimentary. Thanks to television, *ALF* and *Battlestar Galactica* have been fixed in the public consciousness as representative examples of fantasy and science fiction. Far more people have seen the Bigfoot episodes of *The Six Million Dollar Man* than the thought-provoking SF films *π* or *Solaris*. For every visionary program, like *Babylon 5*, there are dozens of abominations like *Manimal* or *The Man from Atlantis*, which obscure the rare quality shows through sheer numbers alone.

If all this weren't insulting enough to those who take fantasy and SF seriously, the cable channel devoted to those genres uses that most hated of abbreviations—"Sci-Fi"—to identify itself.

Little wonder, then, that genre filmmakers vent their anger at TV every chance they get.

Apostles of the Vast Wasteland

Even the kindest depictions of television minions in genre films are none too flattering. The TV station staffers shown

in the opening sequence of George Romero's zombie epic, *Dawn of the Dead*, are more typical. These buffoons continue to transmit addresses for emergency shelters despite the knowledge that the havens may be closed or overrun by flesh-munching undead. No great passion drives them to do this. It's an automatic response: For television's drones, maintaining an audience is more important than providing the truth, even during the Apocalypse.

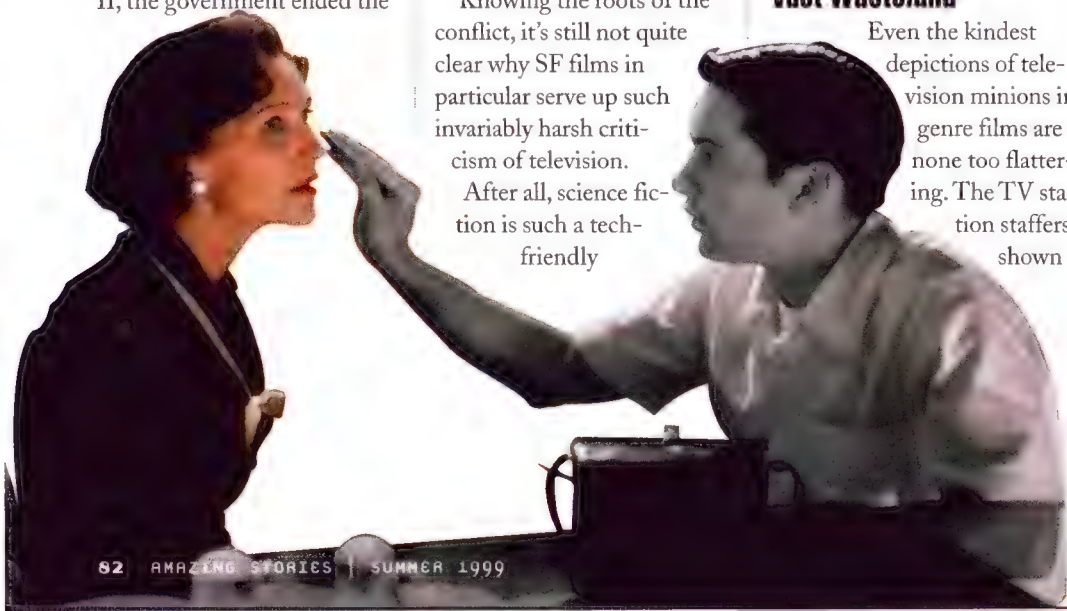
These characters pale beside the more actively malevolent types that populate control booths and executive offices in still other genre films. As the venal, joyless TV exec in *Scrooged*, Richard Donner's rereading of *A Christmas Carol*, Bill Murray cheers when a commercial he has created literally frightens an old woman to death. Richard Dawson lifts *The Running Man* above the slough of mediocrity with his portrayal of a ruthless, tyrannical game show host; his character's on-camera persona is all the more ironic because of its semblance to Dawson's own *Family Feud* façade. *They Live* places control of television in the hands of opportunistic aliens, while the fantasy-comedy *Stay Tuned* postulates a TV network run literally from the depths of hell.

We are Controlling Transmission

The shows these lowlifes and villains foist off on the public are, if anything, more contemptible than their creators. These programs fall into one of three undesirable categories. The largest category includes television programming that is little more than propaganda—

◀ IGNORANCE VS. INNOCENCE.

Like serpents in the Garden of Eden, the 1990s kids introduce color to the drab world of Pleasantville.



either political or commercial. Sometimes the propaganda is overt, more often it's subliminal.

In John Carpenter's fatally flawed but occasionally clever *They Live*, imperialist aliens use a signal delivered through television sets to blind humans to their gruesome true faces. The film's conclusion hinges upon the capture or, better still, destruction of a television broadcast center. You can almost hear *They Live*'s ex-wrestler action hero, Roddy Piper, giving voice to the SF filmmakers' scorn for TV as he opens fire on the transmitter: "This one's for *Homeboys in Outer Space*!"

The second type of content commonly ascribed to TV by SF films is best exemplified in the exploitation classic *Death Race 2000* and the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *The Running Man*. Here, television is little more than an electronic Colosseum. Mayhem and mutilation are the bywords in the gladiatorial contests staged for TV. Their *raison d'être*, like that of the interactive soaps in *Fahrenheit 451*, is to distract a public oppressed by a crippled near-future economy or a tyrannical, media-savvy oligarchy. As an added bonus, this depiction of television affords cynical filmmakers plenty of opportunities to showcase just the sort of violence their protagonists criticize as "bread and circuses" diversions within the story's boundaries.

More recent films like *The Truman Show* and the less ambitious *EDtv* deal with the third type of TV content derided by moviemakers. The voyeuristic shows central to these films highlight television's intrusiveness and damn it for transforming the private into the public, for turning

real life into a sideshow attraction. SF and fantasy films have satirized such "voyeur TV" in even more radical ways for years.

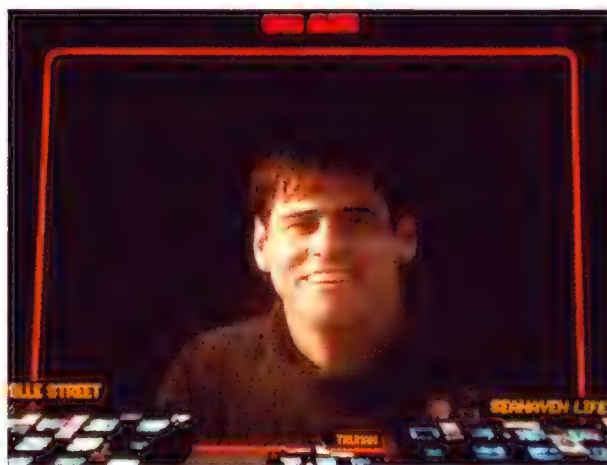
Shock Treatment, Jim Sharman's and Richard O'Brien's surprisingly dreary 1981 sequel to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, boasts one really good idea: a town that exists as the in-studio audience for a television network. The locals eat and sleep in their seats, do little but watch the

oddballs trawled from the general public now populate the stages of daytime talk shows, just as TV news has mutated into the sort of infotainment that seemed so outrageous in Paddy Chayefsky's brilliant script for *Network*.

In the face of their implacable enemy, SF and fantasy filmmakers tirelessly proclaim the dangers of television. Director Gary Ross offers one of the more clever cautions in his superior 1998

segregationist laws and sham trials. In this, the film's message is clear: Scratch Ward Cleaver and you'll find "Tailgunner" Joe McCarthy lurking just below the skin.

Most genre films present television's dangers as more direct and obvious. In horror flicks such as *Nightmare on Elm Street 3* and *Shocker*, TV is a consistently reliable medium through which supernatural nasties can reach out and hack their youthful victims. More obscure films like *The Video Dead* and the Italian gorefest *Demons 2* cast the television set as a portal through which the dead can shamble. The omnipresence of the television set in Western society makes these threats more relevant to audiences than traditional Hollywood bogeymen. We suspect there's something sinister in the way people are drawn to the Tube—like the little girl in *Poltergeist*—yet we're unable to turn away.



Films like *The Truman Show* deal with television's intrusiveness and damn it for transforming the private into the public.

monitors showing the program being taped live right in front of them. This closed system means that the network's "actors" must be plucked from the audience. The emotional and sexual problems of these common folk become the fodder for game shows and soap operas. In return for sacrificing their privacy and dignity, the new media personalities are passionately worshiped—or, in a few cases, vilified—by the same people with whom they shared seats moments before.

Yet television has proven time and again that it can spew more loathsome fare than even the most overstated cinematic satire. Slack-jawed

fantasy, *Pleasantville*. When a young man and his sister are transported into his favorite 1950s black-and-white family sitcom, he learns that the innocence and stability he so valued in the show are actually ignorance and repression. So, like serpents in the Garden of Eden, the 1990s kids introduce color to the drab world of *Pleasantville* through knowledge of sex and jazz, literature and art.

Not everyone in *Pleasantville* appreciates this newfound freedom of expression and thought, especially the men who had previously been unchallenged lords of their traditional TV families. They deal with the threat through

I Like to Watch

As far back as 1953, writer/producer/director Arch Oboler captured America's nascent uneasiness with the television set and its apparent power over our lives. In an obscure little gem called *The Twonky*, a man named Cary West (Hans Conried) finds that his television set is alive. The square box proceeds to trundle about and pitch in with chores, but also hypnotizes anyone who tries to prevent it from taking over West's life.

In more recent genre films, the people whose lives are overwhelmed by TV clearly deserve their fate. When director Peter Weir cuts away to people watching *The Truman Show*, he presents fragile old women huddled on couches, fat men wallowing

Silver Screen

in bathtubs, security guards stuffing their faces—in short, people who seem to have no life detached from the Tube. In *Videodrome*, the right-wing conspirators who hope to rid America of lowlife scum intend to reach their target audience through television. Similarly, the suits at Network 23 show little concern when

tant fact: The battle between cinema and television is over. It has been for nearly fifty years.

Now Entering TV-Land

Explaining the relationship between television and film as simply adversarial is to make the same mistake as those who reduce the causes of the Civil War down simply to slavery. In 1951, five years before the ban was lifted on Hollywood

as well. The message of New Line's *Pleasantville* might be that art, and life, should not be modeled after the traditional TV sitcom. It's a nice sentiment, but that same studio's more widely hyped and financially successful release *Lost in Space* suggests its executives haven't taken the message to heart. Not only is *Lost in Space* derived directly from a television show, its plot is episodic

between shows in a frantic search for an exit. During one particularly hyper sequence, he hops through a number of program parodies, landing, finally, on that familiar couch, part of a familiar set. He does the sort of pratfall he did every week on *Three's Company*, stands, and is confronted by a perky blonde and a mousy brunette, who place their hands on their hips and greet him as if he has returned to that most typical of 1970s T&A shows. Naturally, he screams.

True to its genre film roots, *Stay Tuned* pounds home the message that television is a menace, that the only way to regain control of your life is to shut it off. But the movie's stars, the shows it parodies, even its hyperactive structure are pure television. The film tells you over and over that you need to escape the Tube's influence, yet it stands as proof of something we all suspect: Escape is impossible.

Television has remade cinema and other media—as well as life itself, some might argue—in its own image. Not even this essay is immune, as seen in the subheads used to break the text into more graphically pleasing chunks. The Tube's fragmentary style of presentation has conquered all. There's simply nothing left to see that isn't TV. ☹

In *Videodrome*, the right-wing conspirators who hope to rid America of lowlife scum intend to reach their target audience through television.

their high-speed “blipverts” cause some viewers to explode, in the ironically made-for-TV movie *Max Headroom*, because such inveterate couch potatoes are hardly human beings at all.

The most famous cinematic couch potato is the character of Chance the gardener from the fantasy-tinged black comedy, *Being There*. Brilliantly portrayed by Peter Sellers, Chance is the poster child for an America weaned on television. He has no opinions but what he hears from TV, no real notion of the difference between the Tube and reality. Though the movie itself is slack and overlong, Sellers manages to successfully manifest the essence of television throughout—he is so bland, so inoffensive, that people interpret his actions and silences in whatever way best suits their needs.

All this adds up to a bleak picture of a medium out of control, one working ceaselessly to undermine our intellect and our democracy. But in their rush to scramble for the intellectual high ground on the matter of television, Hollywood filmmakers appear to have missed one rather impor-

tant fact: The battle between cinema and television is over. It has been for nearly fifty years. Now Entering TV-Land Explaining the relationship between television and film as simply adversarial is to make the same mistake as those who reduce the causes of the Civil War down simply to slavery. In 1951, five years before the ban was lifted on Hollywood

films appearing on TV, Columbia became the first studio to start its own television production unit, Screen Gems. Since that time, the links between Hollywood's film production companies and their television counterparts have only become stronger. As a studio, Paramount is behind such TV-critical films as *The Truman Show*, while as a TV network, it airs such insulting genre fare as the previously derided *Homeboys in Outer Space*. Over time, the business and creative connections between the two industries have changed the nature and identity of film. Because most films are viewed on TV screens from “pan-and-scan” VHS tapes, directors often restrict themselves from using the entire image area available to them on cinema screens. The audience that's viewing those tapes is identical to the TV audience, too—alone, parked on the couch—rather than a part of the joyous, communal consumption of film celebrated in movies such as *Cinema Paradiso*.

The mutation of cinema is occurring on an aesthetic level

and its overall structure circular, like that of a TV episode. The story closes with the characters essentially unaffected by the film's events, locked into the comfortable roles that make for good action figure sales and easy sequels.

The frequent exchange of properties between television and cinema is the most convincing evidence of all that the nature of film has changed. X-FILES were willing to accept a movie that offered little more than a two-hour episode of the television series. *The X-Files: Fight the Future* even seemed paced for the insertion of commercial breaks in all the appropriate places for network viewing. And as films increasingly take on this TV-twisted structure, more and more of them will make the jump to the small screen, such as *Stargate* or *Entertainment Weekly's* pick for best show of 1998, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

The biggest laugh in the fantasy-comedy *Stay Tuned* comes when star John Ritter tumbles over a couch. In the film, Ritter plays a TV-addicted loser. A deal-with-the-devil plot lands him inside his new television set, jumping



About the Author

James Lowder is not, as you might suspect from this essay, a “TV-bating mutant,” though he does tend to agree much more often with critic Neil Postman than mogul Ted Turner when it comes to media matters. He's the author of five dark fantasy novels, co-author of a sixth, and the regular writer for Sci-Fi Universe's “Cool Books” column.



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*A column designed to acquaint the ordinary person with science
and other stuff that's really hard to understand.*

ASK DR. SCIENCE™

April 1991 *J. H. of Ocumare del Tuy, Venezuela, asks:*

Dr. Science, can you tell me if the universe is expanding or contracting?

Dear J. H.: I would be very pleased to answer this absorbing question. There is a great deal about the universe you wouldn't understand unless you've had the proper training at a Science place. I'll try to go slow.

We used to think the universe was static, but we don't anymore. If the whole thing was just sitting there, the gravity of all that stuff would cause it to contract into almost nothing. Luckily, the best evidence to date is that the universe is expanding, and will keep on doing it.

That's good news for us all.

I could tell you a lot more, J. H., but I'd have to go into time-space, density, gravity, dark matter, etc., and it would go right over your head.

I will tell you I have learned a lot about personal expansion in the last few years. The laws of the universe do not necessarily apply to people. If you do just sit around, you definitely will not contract. What you'll do is begin to expand, and you'll learn what density and gravity are all about.

You think the universe is big? You ought to see Dr. Science at the beach.

July 1998 *R. R. of Toast, North Carolina, asks:*

Dr. Science, can you tell me something about the birth of the computer?

Dear R. R.: The first electronic computer was put together in 1946 by scientists at the University of Pennsylvania. It was called ENIAC, and it contained around eighteen thousand radio tubes, at a cost of nearly half a million dollars. For five years before ENIAC went into operation, you couldn't find a tube anywhere in Pennsylvania. A tube goes out on your radio, tough—you've got to go out of state to get a tube.

Early computers took up a lot more space than they do

now. ENIAC was housed in a thirty-by-fifty-foot room—which is larger than many houses. And that's not counting the candy and drink machines.

Exactly ninety-two seconds after ENIAC became operational, it crashed. Once the scientists got it going again, a message appeared in the tiny four-inch screen:

**IF YOU ARE UNDER
21 YEARS OF AGE,
DO NOT ENTER.
PRESS EXIT NOW.**

December 1952 *L. C. of Mulberry, California, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, astronomers seem to be at odds over the Pluto controversy. What is your opinion on this issue?
Dear L. C.: Science has been split on this one for years. If Pluto's a dog, then what is Goofy? I don't know, and I don't think we'll see an answer in our lifetimes.

October 1943 *T. N. of Hiva Oa, French Polynesia, asks:*
Dr. Science, can you tell me who invented motion pictures?

A most intriguing question, T. N. Many people take credit for this invention, including Thomas Edison. One of the more interesting stories surrounding this discovery concerns a bet between a Mr. Muybridge and a Mr. Isaacs.

Sometime around 1870, they placed a number of cameras along an oval track,



each camera timed to take pictures in sequence of a horse racing by; thus making a series of "motion" pictures.

The bet? Does a horse have all four hooves off the ground at any time? The answer, according to the experiment, was no, it does not.

However, that's not the end of the story. As it often does in Science, serendipity comes into play. (Look it up, T. N.) Searching for something else to do, Muybridge and Isaacs wondered what would happen if two, or even ten, horses ran down a track at the same time. It didn't seem logical that all of the horses would finish at the same time. And if they didn't, you could bet on which one came in first.

Engrossed in this new enterprise, Muybridge and Isaacs put their now useless cameras in Isaacs' garage and forgot all about them.

Here, though, serendipity again comes into play. One afternoon, a young man named Sam Goldwyn came by to watch the horses run around the track. He was suddenly struck with an extraordinary idea: Horses alone seemed fairly dull, but what if you added some drama to the event? What if you put riders on the horses? What if you dressed half of them as Sioux Indians, and the other half as U.S. Cavalry troopers? People would pay to see something like that.

Later, when he shared this concept with Muybridge and Isaacs, Isaacs became suddenly excited. "Mr. Goldwyn," he said, "just wait till you see what I've got in my garage!"

If there's anything more thrilling than Science, I haven't seen it yet.

May 1999 *R. C. of Greenbush, Minnesota, would like an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, should we be overly concerned about Y2K?

Dear R. C.: You can worry about whatever the hell you like. Dr. Science is worried about IRS, HMO, and DAH—Debbie Ann Hogandell—who somehow got my address.

January 1957 *C. D. of Min-feng, China, wants an answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, I'll be earning my M.A. this year. Do you feel it's important to seek an additional degree? Some of the guys I know say it's a waste of time.

Dear C. D.: Are you kidding? You're out on a date with a good-looking lady, she's maybe a little shy? What I always say is, "It's okay, dear, I'm a doctor."

Hey—get two or three degrees while you're at it.

August 1967 *L. R. of Moosup Valley, Rhode Island, asks:*

Dr. Science, if you were the first person to meet an extraterrestrial, what three questions would you ask?

Dear L. R.: Thanks for this thought-provoking question. First, I would cordially greet this alien visitor, and assure it that the people of Earth welcome it and its entire race, that we mean them no harm, and desire to live in peace and harmony with every being in this vast universe.

Next, I would tell it that all the peoples of Earth are eager to learn about our visitors'

incredible advances in science, medicine, and the arts.

Then, I would ask our new friend if it happened to have two twenties for a ten.

February 1999 *C. R. of Jorhat, India, asks:*

Dr. Science, I've been reading about new studies concerning the speed of light. Would you comment on these findings?

Dear C. R.: I've been getting a lot of mail on this. For those dummies who haven't heard the news, I'll present a brief overview: As most everyone knows, light travels at the speed of 186,282 miles per second in a vacuum. What happened is, some scientists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have figured out a way to slow light down to 38 miles per hour.

They do this with lasers and a bunch of supercooled sodium atoms. Light gets absorbed when it passes through different kinds of stuff. Sodium seems to be real good at this.

We're talking here about electromagnetically induced transparency, okay? Don't ask. Scientists on the project feel they might be able to slow light down until it almost stops. Can you believe it?

All I say, and I'm not one to knock fellow Science persons, is that we're asking for a heap of trouble here. You get in your car, turn on the lights. The lights are going 38 miles per hour. You get up to 39 and you're driving in the dark.

There's only one positive thing I see coming out of all this. You turn off the lights in your room, you've got time to

get in bed. You won't be stumbling on stuff or bumping your toes anywhere. Toss this mess in the back room, Cambridge. Work on a cure, do something worthwhile.

June 1942 *R. S. of Orange Walk, Belize, wants to know the answer to this question:*

Dr. Science, do you think cats have extrasensory perception?

Dear R. S.: Have you got a cat? I've got a cat, and I don't think mine has room in her fur-ball brain for anything extra. I'm certain she doesn't have sense, and the only thing I've seen her perceive is food.

Cats eat, sleep, and go to the litter box. These are the things they can do.

September 1988 *T. S. of Mars Hill, Maine, asks:*

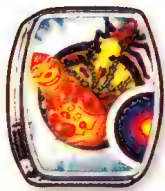
Dr. Science, could you explain the String Theory, please?

Dear T. S.: I'll be glad to. The universe is a sweater. It's either unraveling or it's not. How do I know?

All questions appearing in ASK DR. SCIENCE have been adapted from questions sent in by readers to AMAZING Stories over the years, or have been sent to Dr. Science by bill collectors and other mean-spirited persons.

We welcome your questions for this column. But please do not address your questions to Dr. Science himself. Dr. Science knows better than to open his own mail. Address your questions to Neal Barrett, Jr., Dr. Science's friend, at AMAZING Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057-0707. Mr. Barrett will see to it that your questions are slipped under Dr. Science's door.





Looking Backward

In this new review column, we will cover games of special interest to the science fiction reader, from computer and role-playing games to card and board games, and all the types in between. "Game Space" debuts with an overview of some genre staples.



▲ GAME OVER, MAN!
It's *Aliens* vs. the *Predator* vs. the *Marines* in this trading card game.

WHEN I WAS A KID, science fiction wasn't widely recognized. Cowboys and private eyes dominated TV and cinema. (Sure, there were a few notable exceptions—programs such as the *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*, and films such as *The Omega Man*—but the average person considered these to be weird tales or horror.) *Monopoly* clones monopolized mass-market games, and military simulations prevailed in the "hobby" game market. The only place a person could turn for a solid supply of science fiction was bookstores, toward the back, usually paperbacks. It was a lonely time to be an SF fan.

When I began designing games a decade and a half ago, science fiction was still something of a lost cause in the gaming milieu. Board games were still largely historical, following a long tradition that reached past H. G. Wells and his toy-soldier hobby all the way to the origins of chess, one could argue. As for the roleplaying phenomenon, it was thoroughly dominated by fantasy, playing upon the fairy tales that people had heard as children. There simply wasn't a body of commonly held themes and images for the science fiction game designer to draw from.

Things are different now, I'm pleased to say. Kids now are growing up with SF images and themes as much a part of their background as those old fairy tales. Television and theaters are filled with science fiction. Some are technological spectacles; some even have thought-provoking plots. As for SF publishing, it has become (nearly) as respected as any other genre. And as always, what people see on the screen and read in books, they soon want to experience in games.

In past issues, *AMAZING Stories* has covered recent SF computer games in the "Electro

Games" column, so this first look at genre games briefly introduces a few of the most interesting science fiction board games and card games. All the titles discussed here are currently available, either from the manufacturer (most offer online catalogs) or in game, book, comic, or hobby stores.

Aliens Predator Customizable Card Game

If you have never played a customizable card game—also called collectible or trading card games—the concept bears a quick explanation. Players each bring their own deck of cards to the table and play those decks against one another. As with collectible sports cards, the cards for these games are packaged in random mixes, usually with varying levels of rarity. As players collect more cards, they can assemble different collections in their decks, to facilitate various strategies and styles of play. Half of the challenge to playing a trading card game well is in that personalized deck design.

Now, trading card games are, by nature, a bit more complicated than most board games, but *Aliens Predator*, which features the title figures from two popular SF films, tends toward the less complex end of the spectrum. The rules are clear and to the point, and the cards are nicely designed both in terms of visual appeal and game mechanics. Further, the starter decks are much less random than those of most other trading card games, so they play well right out of the box.

Players have a choice of bringing an *Aliens* deck, a *Predator* deck, or a *Marines* deck to the game. In the basic game, each race has a different goal for victory, but larger free-for-alls can be played with the goal of simply destroying all opposing characters. Fans of the *Aliens* or *Predator* movies should certainly enjoy this game.

The Awful Green Things from Outer Space

Tom Wham has a reputation for designing (and illustrating) whimsical games, and *The Awful Green Things from Outer Space* is one of his best. The board in this game represents the interior of the starship *Znutar*, the scene of a desperate conflict between the ship's crew (controlled by one player) and an infestation of voracious green monsters (controlled by the other). Each turn the monsters propagate, then move and attack. In response, the crew can gather weapons, then move and attack.

One of the most entertaining things about the game is that the crew members have no way of

knowing what effect a weapon will have on the monsters until they experiment with it. (Weapon effects are randomized with each new game using the counters.) For example, setting an electric fence across the corridor may shock that advancing horde of monsters, killing or stunning them; or it may be that they *like* electricity, and it makes them grow!

The Steve Jackson Games version of *Awful Green Things* is a compact package, roughly the size of a paperback book. If you try the game and like it, watch at online auctions for an older version from TSR, Inc., which is much larger and has a mounted game board.

BattleTech

Although combat between giant, humanoid war machines is a genre spawned in Japanese anime, the *BattleTech* game has long been an American favorite for simulating such battles on the tabletop. The game is relatively easy to learn, making it appropriate even for young children. Attacking involves a simple dice roll; the detail lies in keeping track of combat effects on your robot, or 'Mech. For one thing, moving and firing weapons generates heat in the machine, which can activate a fail-safe shut-down if the pilot isn't careful. (There's nothing worse than having your battle machine shut down just as the enemy is drawing a bead on it.) For another, damage in the game is applied to specific areas and systems on the target, adding a sense of surprise and drama.

There is also a more complete rules compendium available for players who, rather than playing with stand-up cardboard pieces on a paper map, would like to paint miniatures and fight their battles on 3-D terrain. This level of play is quite popular at game conventions.

Car Wars

Inspired by such films as *Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior*, and *Beyond Thunderdome*, the *Car Wars* game lets players design autos, motorcycles, and trucks, add vehicular weapons and armor, then pit them against one another in arena duels and road races. The game comes with various sample designs for players to use, but much of the fun is in creating your own vision of "death on wheels." The shooting rules in the game are fairly simple. The movement rules are slightly more complicated, however. In essence, each car moves a set distance during each of its movement phases, but those traveling faster move more often. The result is a fluid, believable turn sequence that conveys the sense

of actually driving these combat vehicles.

As with *Awful Green Things*, the basic *Car Wars* set comes packaged in a plastic "pocket box." Steve Jackson Games also offers a deluxe edition in a larger box, with rules for boats, helicopters, and other vehicles, as well as a separate compendium of rules oriented toward miniatures play.

Cosmic Encounter (Simply Cosmic)

Many professional game designers credit *Cosmic Encounter* with inspiring them to view their craft in a new light. It was perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most demonstrative, evidence that giving players even footing in a game does not necessarily mean giving them identical resources and rules.

In *Cosmic Encounter* (and its introductory version, *Simply Cosmic*), players take the roles of alien races competing to establish bases on other planets. The first race to gain five bases outside its own stellar system wins. What makes the game so revolutionary is that each race has a special power that allows it to "bend" the game rules in one particular way. Each of these powers comes complete with an entertaining psychohistorical description of the

race, to help players get in the mood. The game comes with more than twice the number of races as players, so that every session can involve a different mix of powers. An attractive set of components adds further value to the game.

Moonshot

Here's a game that manages to be historical and fit the science fiction bill at the same time (at least in that it deals with space exploration). In *Moonshot*, each player is involved in a "space race." The first to complete six missions (drawn at random), and then a lunar landing, wins. The missions are actual NASA examples (though future expansions promise to deal with historical Soviet missions, as well), and they are illustrated with excellent color photos from NASA files.

The game components in *Moonshot* are very nice, and the bits of historical information on each card, together with the reproductions of actual mission patches, make this product a pleasant learning experience. My only complaint is that, to handle resource expenditure in the game, the designer borrowed a rules technique from trading card games. The result feels unnecessary and even a bit counter-intuitive; play money would have done the job at least as nicely, and would make more sense. Still, that's a minor flaw to an otherwise excellent game.



Although combat between giant, humanoid war machines is a genre spawned in Japanese anime, the *BattleTech* game has long been an American favorite for simulating such battles on the tabletop.

◀ GET READY TO RUMBLE. *BattleTech* welcomes you to the battlefields of the 31st century.

GameSpace RoboRally

Players new to the trading card game hobby should keep in mind that the *Star Wars* game rules are more intricate than those for most mass-market games.

In the *RoboRally* game, players each control a cute little robot in a race across the floors of a futuristic automated factory. The first robot to touch each of the flags in order wins.

However, "control" is perhaps too strong a term in this case. Movement is determined by choosing five cards from a hand of nine dealt randomly, and setting those five facedown in the order they will be played. As a result, the robots lurch comically across the board in fits and starts. As they move, the robots also fire lasers at one another. For each point of damage a robot suffers, its player receives one fewer card to choose from in the next move. Sustain enough damage and some previously chosen cards remain in play turn after turn, as if stuck in the robot's memory. As if that's not trouble enough, the factory floor is active, too, with conveyor belts, pits, crushers, and lasers, just to mention a few potential threats. Sometimes, just after your robot makes its move, another may enter the same space and push yours into one of these hazards.

Still, clever play has the best chance of success—

assuming players have a good sense of spatial relationships. The game's only flaw is that the cards

with turning maneuvers on them would better be labeled "clock-

wise" and "counter-clockwise" rather than "right" and "left." Some people have trouble visualizing their robot's right and left when the piece faces different directions.

The game allows for repair stations to fix damaged robots and even fit them with specialized equipment. Four supplements are available, to add new boards and other elements and allow the game to be played again and again with new discoveries each time.

Space Hulk

The *Space Hulk* game fits the same genre as the *Aliens* movies. In this game, one player controls one or

two squads of "Imperial" marines; the other player controls an endless supply of alien "genestealers." As in *Aliens*, the beasts are implacable and deadly in hand-to-hand combat, while the marines possess some long-range firepower. The game design is clear and clean, admirably conveying the action of military SF.

Games Workshop always has impressive components in its games, and *Space Hulk* is no exception. The board tiles, figures, counters, and even the books are beautifully made to quickly capture the attention and durable enough to stand up to continued play. Also, because *Space Hulk* fits within the larger umbrella of GW's *Warhammer 40K* game universe, it is expandable with further miniatures and missions. I highly recommend this game.

Star Trek Customizable Card Game

In the *Star Trek* customizable card game, two players compete as different power bases (Federation, Klingon, etc.) to complete missions, and the first to score one hundred points of missions wins. To start, the players cooperate to create a "spaceline" of mission cards, with cards detailing problems and rewards "seeded" face down under some or all of those missions. Then they use their remaining cards to assemble the personnel and equipment necessary to fulfill the requirements listed on each mission card. When two opposing "teams" of personnel occupy the same point on the spaceline, combat can occur.

As with many trading card games, the *Star Trek* customizable card game rules may seem complicated to new players. Still, the game captures the flavor of the universe well. It focuses upon the time of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and so on. After mastering the introductory version, players can move on to expansion decks and packs, which feature new cards.

Star Wars Customizable Card Game

In the *Star Wars* customizable card game, one player takes the role of the Rebel Alliance, the other that of the Empire. Each brings into play worlds and sites from the movies, then uses starships, vehicles, characters, and equipment to control those locations. By controlling a location, a

player drains the opponent of Force, which is represented by the size of each player's deck. The first player to run out of cards loses. The game has both strategic and tactical elements, the first



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involving general card play, and the second involving the movement of forces between locales and the selection of specific targets during combat.

Again, players new to the trading card game hobby should keep in mind that the *Star Wars* game rules are more intricate than those for most mass-market games. Still, any extra effort to learn the rules is amply rewarded by the richness of the play.

Other Games

This list isn't exhaustive, by any means. Scores of other science fiction games are available for those who care to look for them: SF trivia games, murder-mystery

games, *Monopoly* versions, VCR and computer games, and so on, besides many old classic SF war games. We'll cover others in future installments of this column. ♣



About the Author

Lester Smith has been designing and reviewing games professionally since 1985. He is best known as the designer of the DRAGON DICE® and Dark

Conspiracy games. Fascinated with all things make-believe, he spends far too much time writing tales, designing and playing games, attending conventions, and browsing the Web, and far too little time sleeping. You can learn more about Les and his projects at <www.lester.smith.net.>

BUYERS' GUIDE

Aliens Predator Customizable Card Game

HarperPrism, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022-5299
<www.harperprism.com>
Each starter deck: 60 cards, 1 die, 20 counters, rulebook, and start-up sheet; \$8.95
For 2 or 3 players (each needs a deck)
Playing time: 1+ hours
Design: Precedence Publishing, Inc. (John Myler, Ran Ackels, Paul W. Brown III, David Hewet, Ted Kraver)

The Awful Green Things from Outer Space

Steve Jackson Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760
<www.sjgames.com>
Boxed set: board, rules, 5 six-sided dice, and 140 counters; \$19.95
For 2 players
Playing time: 30 to 60 minutes
Design: Tom Wham

BattleTech

FASA Corporation, 1100 W. Cermak, Suite #B305, Chicago, IL 60608 <www.fasa.com>
Boxed set: 48 full-color playing pieces, full-color introductory rulebook, advanced rulebook, 2 full-color 22" x 17" map sheets, record sheets, and dice; \$25.00
For 2+ players
Playing time: several hours
Design: Jordan K. Weisman, L. Ross Babcock, Sam Lewis

Car Wars

Steve Jackson Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760
<www.sjgames.com>
Boxed set: 103 counters, rulebook, 4 "road" sections, zip-lock bag, and a plastic game box; \$9.95
For 2+ players
Playing time: 30+ minutes
Design: Chad Irby and Steve Jackson

Cosmic Encounter (Simply Cosmic)

Originally by Eon Games, later by West End Games. Current version *Simply Cosmic*, Mayfair Games, 5211 West 65th Street, Bedford Park, IL 60638
<www.coolgames.com>
Boxed set: 5-piece game board, 110 cards, 8 alien powers, 80 tokens, hyperspace cone, and rulebook; \$20
For 3 to 6 players
Playing time: 30 to 90 minutes
Design: Bill Eberle, Jack Kittredge, Bill Norton, and Peter Olotka
Also available as a Web game; visit <www.cosmicencounter.com>

Moonshot

Galactic Attic, 1102 Dartmouth Street, Chattanooga, TN 37405
<www.galacticattic.com>
Boxed set: board, 180 playing cards, 28 mission counters, and 4 pewter lunar modules; \$39.95
For 1 to 4 players
Playing time: 30 to 60 minutes
Design: Van Overbay

RoboRally

Wizards of the Coast, P.O. Box 707, Renton, WA 98507-0707
<www.wizards.com>
Boxed set: 6 boards, 8 miniatures, 110 playing cards, 107 counters,

rulebook, and 2 reference sheets; \$39.95
For 2 to 8 players
Playing time: 1 to 2 hours
Design: Richard Garfield

Space Hulk

Games Workshop, 3431 Benson Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21227
<www.games-workshop.com>
Boxed set: 54 interlocking board sections, 30 plastic miniatures, 71 flat counters, 24 stand-up door counters with plastic bases, rulebook, mission book, 7 dice, and 2 sheets of labels; \$59.99
For 2 players
Playing time: 30 to 90 minutes
Design: Richard Halliwell

Star Trek Customizable Card Game

Decipher Inc., 235 Granby Street, Norfolk, VA 23510-1813
<www.decipher.com>
Recommended starting point: *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* expansion set with ready-to-play 60-card starter deck and rules booklet; \$9.95
For 2 players (each needs a deck)
Playing time: 30 to 90 minutes
Design: Uncredited

Star Wars Customizable Card Game

Decipher Inc., 235 Granby Street, Norfolk, VA 23510-1813
<www.decipher.com>
Recommended starting point: *Star Wars: Special Edition* expansion set with ready-to-play 60-card starter deck and rules booklet; \$12.50
For 2 players (each needs a deck)
Playing time: 30 to 90 minutes
Design: Uncredited

AMAZING STORIES

Coming Next Issue

Star Trek fans are in for a treat in the Fall issue of *AMAZING Stories*. In his prequel to the popular "Captain Proton" *Voyager* episodes, pulp fiction author D. W. "Prof" Smith pits the good captain against Doctor Chaotica and the Space Vortex of Doom. And, in a new *The Next Generation* story, author M. Shayne Bell launches the *Enterprise* crew on a dangerous mission to rescue the survivors of an ice-ravaged planet.

Look for these other stellar stories:

- Science fiction great Frederik Pohl gives us part one of "Hatching the Phoenix," a new Heechee novella.
- Nebula Award winner James Morrow tells us about "Kevin's Fetch," an adaptation from his forthcoming book *The Eternal Footman*.
- In Russell Asplund's "Ascension," a man must choose between immortality and the allure of the flesh.
- William Eakin's "Homesickness" amuses us with more alien abduction hijinks in Redgunk, Mississippi.

And don't miss our special alternate history section, with an essay from Harry Harrison and a new Civil War-era tale from John G. Hemry, as well as our regular review columns and features.

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Nursery Crimes

If you're gonna ruin the rhyme, be prepared to do the time.

BY DEVON MONK

SEVENS DON'T ALWAYS come up lucky. Take the dwarves, for example. First it was the mining accident that forced two of the seven to change their names to Lefty and Limpy; then it was the shooting at the Old Woman's Shoe bar that left them all dead.

I'd caught the dwarves' killer, but I couldn't shake the feeling that evil still walked the yellow bricks of Las Fables. It's my job to keep this city clean. My name's Peter Peter. I put 'em in a pumpkin shell.

"This stuff tastes like it's nine days old," Horner said, stirring porridge with his thumb.

Horner lacked table manners, but was a good cop just the same. "Some like it hot, some like it cold," I said, but my mind wasn't on Horner's breakfast. I took a drag off my cigarette and kept my eyes on the door of Paddy Cake's diner. I had a hunch trouble was coming.

Little Miss Muffet burst through the doors. Bullets the size of Horner's thumb lined a strap across her chest, covering all but three points of her badge. She wore camouflage breeches and shirt, boots, and a dark blue beret. Cans of insect repellent swung from both hips as she scanned the diner, looking for me.

I stood and strode over to her. "Let's take this outside," I said. Muffet's had a hair-trigger temper since that spider episode. I didn't want to chance it in a diner full of civilians.

She nodded curtly and clanked out the door. I followed into the sunlight.

"So, what have you got?"

"Hostage situation," she said.

"Where?"

"The dwarves' old place. A gang. They're calling themselves the Sins. They've got Snow White."

My blood chilled. Snow White was the very goodness of this city, the matriarch, the shining star—you get the idea. She was also the best judge Las Fables had ever had. Fairest in the land and all that. If Snow White were killed, Las Fables would fall into decay no matter how many men I put on the street to frisk witches for apples.

"What are their demands?"

"The Book or her life."

The Book. Of course. It was the reason we all lived here in Las Fables. It contained our code of ethics, our sense of self. I had no idea why the Sins wanted it, but I knew it couldn't be for good.

"Then we have some serious bargaining to do," I said. "Call in the Little Boy Blues." I mashed my cigarette on the yellow cobbles. The smell of tobacco mixed with the lingering odor of Muffet's bug spray as she nodded. "I'll meet you down there."

Horner came up behind me. "Trouble?" he asked.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN AJHAR

"Not for long. Go get The Book, and meet me at the dwarves' place."

"The Book? How do you expect me to get that? There's only one copy of the thing, and it's impossible to reserve, much less check out."

"Look, Horner, I know you've got a finger in a lot of pies. I don't care how many strings you have to pull, just get it."

"It's a matter of life or death, I suppose," Horner said.

I nodded and lit another cigarette. "Worse than that."

NOBODY EVER TOLD me I'd have to put on a corset and hose in the name of duty, but in my line of work some things are better left unsaid. I rubbed a palm over my rib cage, checking for the pistol under the lace and frills. Hostage situations can get ugly fast, and I wasn't about to be caught with my bloomers down.

"How many Sins are in there?" I asked as I adjusted my wig.

Horner shrugged. "We counted seven."

"Names?"

"Angry, Greedy, Lusty, Envy, Lazy, Gluttony, and Cocky."

"Who's the leader?"

"Cocky."

I nodded. "What do we have on them?"

Horner pulled out a rap sheet as long as his arm. "Angry: fourteen counts assault with a deadly weapon. Greedy: nine counts embezzlement, two armed robbery. Lusty: six counts obscene phone calling. Envy: three counts car door dinging. Gluttony: multiple counts drunk and disorderly behavior. Lazy's a deadbeat dad, and Cocky's only been busted for one thing: trading magic beans to an impoverished youth for a cow."

Miss Muffet sauntered over to us. "The king is in his counting house, counting out ransom money." She gave me one of her rare smiles. "You look good in lace, boss."

"Save it," I said, as sternly as I could with satin panties riding up my rear. "Offer the money first, Horner."

Horner knew the spiel, but I had to get my mind off Muffet's smile. It didn't seem right, feeling that kind of attraction while I was wearing a skirt.

"Hey, you know what a good boy am I," Horner said. "Luck, Peter." He clapped me on the shoulder and strode over to the line of cop cars surrounding the cottage.

Part of me wanted to be the man on the bullhorn negotiating this one, but I knew I couldn't stand by while someone else risked life and limb to get Snow White out alive.

"I should be the one going in there, boss," Muffet said softly, and she was right. The Sins had demanded a woman deliver The Book. Muffet was the only female on the force, but I couldn't be sure she wouldn't go off half cocked. If a bug got in her line of vision, the entire cottage could go up in smoke.

"I need you out here for backup."

Muffet accepted the lie, tipped her beret, and turned. She left me alone, wagging her cans behind her.

My pistol jabbed a rib, reminding me that I only had six shots if it came down to dirt. Six shots for seven Sins.

I bent and adjusted my garter. A little leather book nestled against my thigh. The Book.

"Cocky, we need to talk." Horner's voice boomed from the bullhorn.

"No negotiations," a voice answered. "The Book."

"We are willing to offer money," Horner said.

There was a pause, a silence in the forest. I wasn't sure, but I thought I heard an argument in the cottage; then Cocky was back.

"No money—"

"How much money?" a second voice called out.

"No money!" Cocky shouted. "If we don't get The Book by nightfall, your little princess is dead."

And then I smelled it—the fragrance of apple pie wafting through the air. Damned deviants! Apples had been outlawed ever since Snow White got hold of that killer Granny Smith.

Horner must have caught a whiff of it too, because he switched tactics immediately.

"Fine, no money. You send out Snow White, unharmed, and we'll send The Book in with one of our girls."

"I'm not stupid, copper! You send in The Book first, then I'll send out the princess."

"Halfway," Horner suggested. "Snow White and The Book are exchanged at the door."

Cocky thought that one over for a while. I took a deep breath and nearly passed out. Next time I was going to wear a bigger corset.

"That was my idea, cop," Cocky called. "Send in your girl with The Book and we'll give you Snow White at the door. That's how I want it. Those are my rules, my final offer."

The bugger definitely had an ego problem.

"Right. We'll send in the girl and The Book now."

"Make her undress," a different voice yelled.

I stopped dead in my tracks. That could be a problem.

Horner paused. I looked over to the line of cop cars and saw the surprise on his face. Miss Muffet just smiled.

"No way, Cocky," Horner said. "The girl stays clothed."

"Fine, fine," Cocky said. "Send in The Book."

Good old Horner could pull a plum out of any situation. I tossed golden tresses over my shoulder, pursed my lips, and strutted down the path to the cottage door. I knocked.

The lock slid. The door pulled back, revealing a little creature the size and shape of a dwarf, but instead of rosy cheeks and colorful clothes, he wore a black leather jacket and matching pants. He had on enough studs, chains, and rivets to bolt Humpty Dumpty together.

"What the hell?" the little guy said.

He had to be the one called Angry.

"I've got The Book," I said in the most virginal tone I could muster.

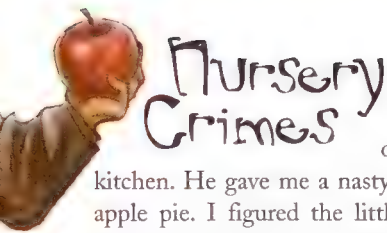
He put one oversized mitt on my arm and dragged me into the house, slamming the door behind me. The overpowering smell of apple pie filled the cottage. I straightened my tresses and took stock of my position. The Sins lined the room, a couple by the window, and all of them were staring at me. I decided it was best to play dumb dame until I knew who was who.

"Oh!" I squealed. "Why, you're not children at all. You're little men." Thanks to the corset, my voice was thin and squeaky.

"Stand there and shut up, girly," Angry growled.

"I wanted to say that!" Envy said, stomping his foot.

"Well, well," Lusty murmured, licking his ample lips and looking me up and down.



Nursery Crimes

"And so big," Greedy said.

Gluttony must have been the one leaning in the doorway to the kitchen. He gave me a nasty smile and wolfed down a whole apple pie. I figured the little fat guy in the corner wearing stained underwear and snoring it up was Lazy, which meant the slick-haired joker in the pin-striped suit had to be Cocky.

"My plan was perfect!" he said, his voice triumphant. "I told you I could lure them in. I told you they'd bow to my demands. I told you—"

"You told us we'd get a vacation," Angry growled. "How hard can it be to get one stinking book?" He waved his hand at the window, where reflections of cop car lights flashed red and blue.

"I—" Envy began.

But Angry bulldozed over him. "We should have stayed in the Big Apple."

"Apple," Gluttony mumbled through a mouth full of pie.

"I wanted to say that!" Envy said.

"More money there," Greedy agreed. "More wine, more women, more song, more..."

"Women, definitely," Lusty murmured.

"You have a woman," Cocky said, getting hold of the situation again. "A hostage, I might add, which was my idea. You'll get your vacation once my plan is complete."

"What plan?" I asked innocently.

Cocky stopped. "Tell me your name, girl."

I had expected this. "Miss Muffet."

"So it goes like this, Muffet," he said, putting one manicured finger on his lips.

"Little Miss Muffet lay on her tuffet..."

"Kissing both Curtis and Wayne," Lusty added.

"The tax man, he spied her..." Greedy said.

"Took both of her lovers..." Gluttony said.

"And Muffet blew all three away!" Angry yelled.

This was serious! Not only would that rewrite turn Muffet into a murderer instead of an arachnophobe, the damn thing didn't rhyme very well. "That's terrible!"

"Of course it is," Cocky agreed. "When we get done rewriting the rhymes of *Las Fables*, I'll be famous!"

"And rich!" Greedy said.

"And tall!" Envy added.

Lusty had a look in his eyes that told me exactly what he wanted out of all this.

I wasn't about to let the Sins touch *The Book* now. If our rhymes were rewritten, thousands could end up dead. I had to get Snow White out, not only for her safety, but for all of *Las Fables*, too. I glanced around the room.

"Where's the other girl?"

"What other girl?" Cocky asked.

"Snow White." Blank looks. "The hostage?"

The seven little Sins all looked at each other; then Cocky spoke up.

"She's in the kitchen."

"Gagged," Angry added a little too quickly.

"And, uh, unconscious," Lusty said.

I knew they were lying, but why? My gut twisted like a dish of half-baked blackbirds. Something was wrong.

"Did you hurt her?" I asked, my voice dropping an octave.

"Of course we did," Cocky lied. His shifty eyes did double time trying to watch both me and the kitchen door. I headed for the door.

"You can't go in there!" Cocky said.

Gluttony squared his sizable bulk and set his feet. I was about to find out what kind of ramming speed I could build up in heels when the kitchen door swung open, whacking Gluttony on the back of the head and planting him facedown on freshly swept stone.

There, in the doorway to the kitchen, stood Snow White. Raven hair spilled down her narrow shoulders, pale skin stretched across her hawklike nose and protruding jaw. She seemed to be in one piece, wearing a frilly white apron over her black judge's robe. But my heart hit my loafers when I saw the golden brown apple pies in her hands. Juice dripped unnoticed down her arms, and cinnamon traced the edges of her thin, red lips. Snow White had been tasting the forbidden fruit, even after all those years in Apple-eaters Anonymous.

For that, I was going to bring the little jerks down.

"Oh, dear," Snow said to Gluttony's prone body. "I suppose I should have called out before coming through, but you shouldn't have been standing so close to the door in the first place."

Gluttony, unconscious, said nothing.

"I think we should both be more careful next time," she slurred. "Let's just forget this little mishap and go on, shall we?" The Fairest in the Land smiled a crooked, sunny smile. "Who wants more pie?" She looked up.

And saw me.

Her bushy eyebrows drew together as her gaze took me in, from black hose to padded bosom. She briefly studied my face and then looked me straight in the eye. Confusion, recognition, and guilt did a switch-off; then her expression settled down to muzzy shock.

"Peter." She took a step forward, weaving just a bit. "I suspected you'd be along shortly, but I didn't think you'd dress up for the occasion. Is that a new uniform, Detective?"

"Snow," I began in a low voice, all pretense of femininity forgotten, "it's time to leave."

"Detective?" Cocky said.

"Peter?" Lusty said.

"You said you were a dame," Angry growled.

Snow White laughed. "Peter a woman? Well, the hair color does soften your eyes," she mused.

"Just put the pies down slowly, Judge White," I said.

She licked cinnamon off the corners of her lips. "No need to be stern, Peter. I have things under control. However, since you are here, you may arrest them now."

"Not a chance," Cocky said. "Give us *The Book*."

"What kind of a fool do you take me for?" I asked.

"You were stupid enough to believe us," Angry said.

"Stupid enough to bring *The Book*," Greedy said, eyes glinting.

"Which was my idea," Cocky reminded them. "And you will give it to us now."

"In a pig's eye," I said quietly. "I'm Detective Peter Peter, and you are all under arrest." I pulled handcuffs out of my brassiere.

Lusty licked his lips and smiled. "Ooh, bondage," he murmured.

"I don't think so, cop," Cocky said.

"There's seven of us and only one of you," Greedy said.

"We're gonna take you down and pound that Book out of you!" Angry bellowed.

The Sins drew together like a pack of vicious dogs. Lazy and Gluttony even managed to pick themselves up for the fight. I fumbled with the laces of my corset, struggling to get my gun.

"Down!" I yelled to Snow White. I had just enough time to see her drop to the floor before the Sins lunged.

Envy took the first bullet. I aimed at Lusty next. He ripped off one of my fake bosoms on his way down to the floor, and then he lay still. The rest was a blur. I remember Angry chewing through the nylons at my ankle, Gluttony banging a pie pan into my head, and Lazy, well, he really didn't do much more than die in his sleep. Greedy was picking through the pockets of his fallen comrades when a bullet found a home in his shriveled heart.

Which left Cocky.

I held the gun level with his greasy little head. "Now I know what you're thinking," I said. "Did I use six shots or seven? Do you feel lucky?"

"That's a standard police issue revolver," Cocky scoffed. "It only has six shots. Give me The Book."

He advanced with a pickax he must have grabbed during the fight. He swung the ax, knocking the gun out of my hand.

Weaponless, I backed away. I heard a thump at my feet and looked down. The Book lay between my stiletto heels. My garter must have snapped during the struggle.

Cocky saw The Book at the same time I did. He tried to lunge for it but didn't have a chance. I bent, grabbed, and with perfect aim, threw The Book at him.

I've been a cop for a long time. When I throw the book at someone, they don't ever see daylight again. The pickax slid out of Cocky's fingers and pinned him to the cottage floor.

I stood and stared at the carnage for a stretch of forever. Miss Muffet probably would have done fine on this case after all, I thought, or at least no worse than I had.

Then a strange thing happened. The Sins began to fade. I watched, fascinated, as they melted and steamed like watered witches, leaving only their clothes behind.

"My," Snow White said as she pulled herself into a sitting position. "That was certainly heroic, Peter, but not very fair."

My head told me Snow was right. I had played lone gunman against the odds like some prince looking for a quick liplock to fame. I'd gone in with a gun up my corset and endangered both Snow White and Las Fables. But in my gut, I knew things didn't always work out happily ever after.

Judge White was still talking. Apples do that to her. "Now, if each of you had a gun, or a pickax, that would have been more even. On the other hand, there were seven of them, and you were handicapped by having to fight in heels, which you did very nicely, by the way, even though those are completely wrong for that outfit..."

The door burst open. I turned to see Miss Muffet standing with a spray can in each hand and a look in her eyes I had never seen before.

"Are you all right, boss?"

"We heard the shots," Horner said, coming up beside her.

Then they both looked me up and down, from busted heels to flipped wig.

I retrieved The Book from where it lay in the dust. The cover

was scuffed, but otherwise, The Book seemed fine. "Muffet, help Judge White. She's had a hard day."

"Nonsense," she said as Muffet helped her stand. "I had everything under control."

"What about the Sins?" Horner asked.

"You can read it in my report." I found my pistol and shoved it in my corset. "Horner, get my clothes."

And as I watched Judge White walk out of the cottage, I noticed the green curve of an apple tucked in her pocket.

THE REPORT WAS a strange thing to read, even to me, the sole witness. But that wasn't what bothered me. What bothered me was that I had lost my composure in front of a judge and blown away the Sins before they had a fair trial. I had taken justice into my own hands to get what I wanted. In a way, that made me no better than the Sins.

I heard a knock at my door. As I looked up, Horner walked in. "Snow White is doing fine. She admitted to pocketing those apples. She'll be attending AA again. You did a good job in there, Peter."

He eyed the report on my desk. "So, you want to talk about it?"

"You mean how I lost control in front of Judge White? How I handled the situation no better than Muffet would have?" I was feeling sorry for myself and wasn't in the mood for his perky attitude. "Or about how I paraded in front of the entire police force of Las Fables in a pink evening gown and stiletto heels? No, thanks, Horner, just the same."

Horner nodded and picked up the remains of the dress I had left in the corner.

"You did the right thing, Peter," he said quietly, "even if it may not have been the right way to do it. We all know you didn't enjoy dressing like a girl, but because you did, Snow White and Las Fables are safe."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks, Horner."

He headed out the door.

"Horner?"

He looked back.

"Leave the panties."

Horner looked at me strangely but put the panties on my desk. Like I said before, in my line of work, some things are better left unsaid. 🍏



about the author

Devon Monk has been writing fiction, nonfiction, and humor essays for five years. She is the alpha female of a four-generation home in Salem, Oregon, where she has earned a degree in parenting, a fellowship in marriage, and a badge of honor in chaos management. She would like to thank the coffee industry and the little voices in her head for their support.

about the illustrator

Brian Ajhar has been illustrating for magazines, book publishers, and advertising agencies for the past eighteen years. His illustrations have appeared in Time, Newsweek, Forbes, US News & World Report, Rolling Stone, and Bon Appetit. He teaches illustration at Philadelphia University of the Arts and Syracuse University. His original art is available through Storyopolis Gallery in Los Angeles.





Look Out Below!

What might happen to a major city such as New York if a giant meteorite fell into the ocean nearby? The back cover of the June 1940 issue of *AMAZING*

Stories shows artist Julian S. Krupa's conception of such a disaster: a great tidal wave covering skyscrapers and everything else in its path. Henry Gade, who wrote the accompanying article "When Meteorites Crash!" painted his own picture of what would happen if a meteorite hit near a major city. Gade said: "Unbelievably, rushing across the ocean, comes a tidal wave of water that sweeps ships before it like corks. The buildings at the shore are engulfed in foam. They collapse like a house of cards. . . . The water rushes down on us. It engulfs us. As we feel the building fall beneath our feet, we see the final fragments of the meteorite plunge into the sea. All goes black. . . ."

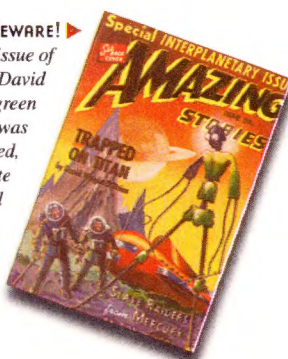
WHEN METEORITES CRASH!

Every day thousands of meteorites bombard the earth. Most of them are tiny and harmless, but some have been huge. Meteor Crater, in Arizona, was caused by one of these. Another devastated an enormous region in Siberia. The Carolina craters are the remains of an ancient meteorite fall. What if such a meteorite, or meteorite swarm, was to fall in the vicinity of a large city? What if one fell into the ocean off New York? The catastrophe that would result would be one of the most terrible in history . . . (See page 144 for complete details.)



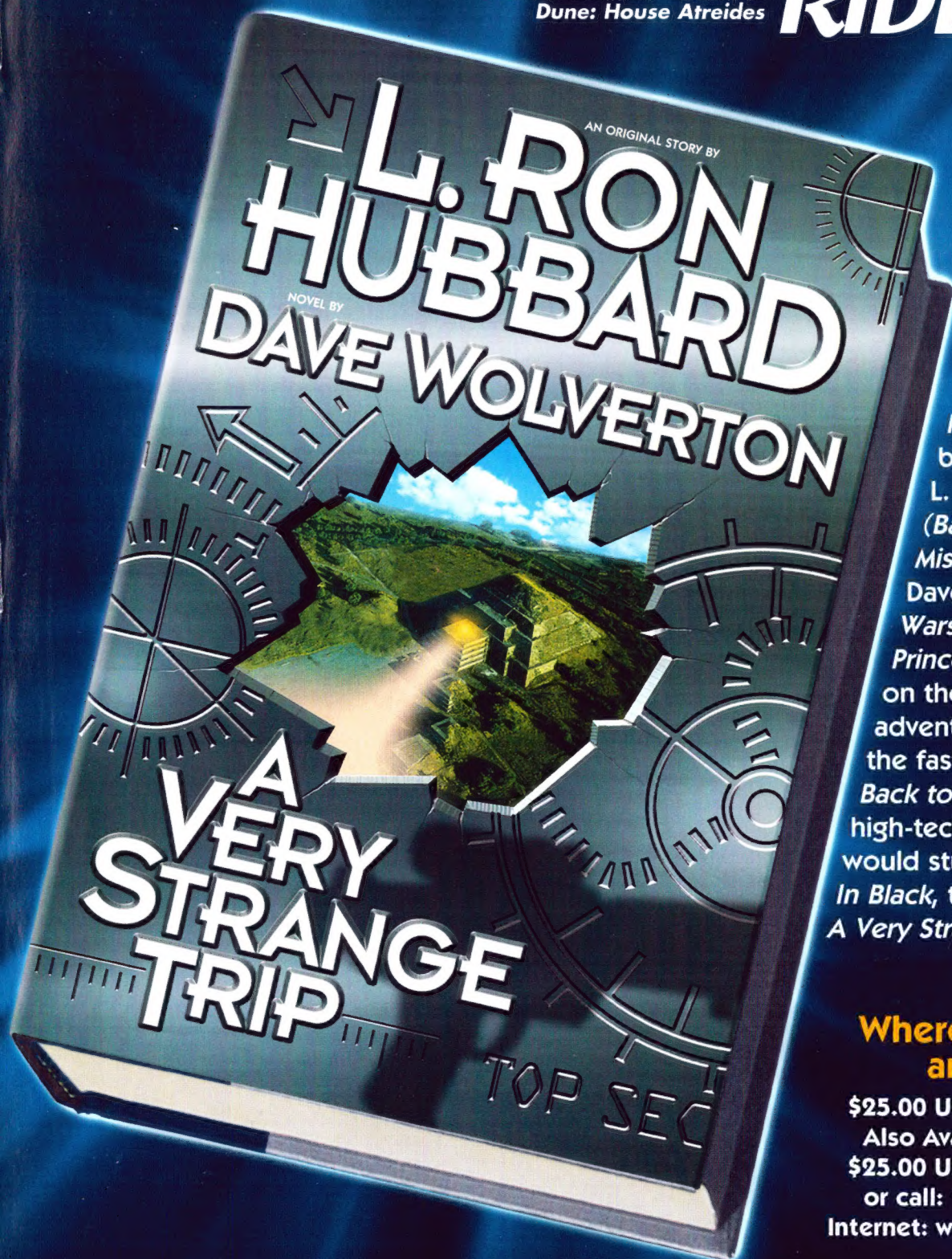
EARTHMAN BEWARE!

The front cover of the June 1940 issue of *AMAZING Stories* featured an illustration for David Wright O'Brien's "Trapped on Titan." The green "stick bug" alien on the right-hand side was described as a thirteen-foot-tall, tentacled, bug-eyed monster. O'Brien, who wrote almost exclusively for *AMAZING Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures* in the early forties, died in 1944 when his plane was shot down over Berlin during World War II.



"A WILD, HIGH-TECH RIDE!"

—Brian Herbert, co-author
Dune: House Atreides



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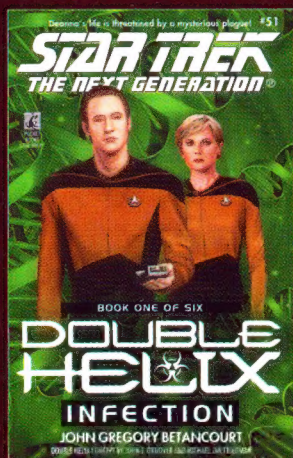
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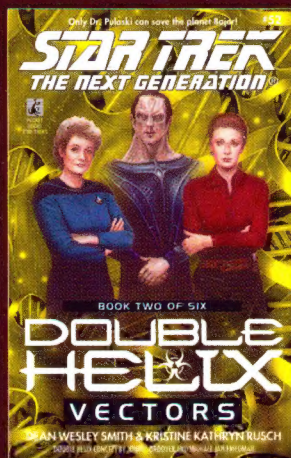
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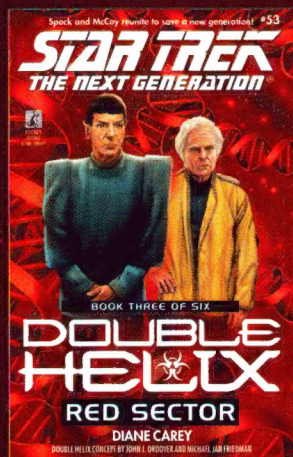
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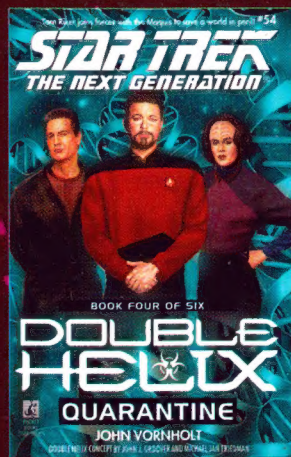
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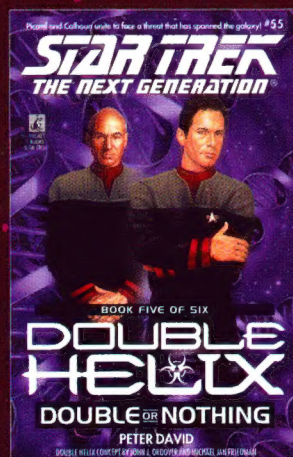
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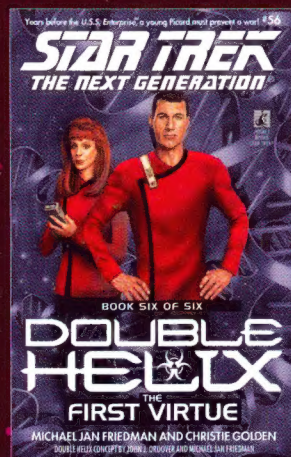
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